



What Works for Physical Education

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■ LESSONS LEARNED FROM SUCCESSFUL PHYSICAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN LOW-RESOURCE SCHOOLS IN CALIFORNIA

The Accelerating School Activity Promotion project was funded by The California Endowment to develop recommendations for improving physical education (PE) among California's low-resource schools whose students are at high risk for inactivity and obesity.

The project's *PE Matters* report summarized the health and academic benefits of PE and proven ways of improving PE quality (available at www.calendow.org). The report indicated many PE classes provide very little physical activity, and the situation is worse in low-resource schools. Thus, there is a need to ensure adequate class time for PE and to spend 50 percent or more of that time doing moderate to vigorous physical activity.

The goal of this brief is to summarize ways low-resource schools in California have overcome common obstacles to quality PE. Principals, classroom teachers, students, PE coordinators and specialists throughout the state were interviewed to find out the keys to a successful PE program. (A full set of case studies based on the interviews will be available in November 2007. These case studies will provide more details on how to implement the lessons learned.)

This brief shares some of the lessons learned from those interviewed for the case studies:

- **In schools located in low-resource neighborhoods, PE time may be the only chance children get to be active and try certain sports.** Students who do not have

access to parks or sports clubs outside of school rely on schools to provide active and enjoyable PE, which is vital to their health and development. Many children love PE because it is fun and teaches them physical and social skills they do not learn elsewhere.

"We don't have as much time outside of school or the equipment to do the things we do in PE classes."

*"PE teaches you to be fair and patient so you won't get in trouble."
(school students)*

- **High-performing low-resource schools use supplemental funds to improve PE.** Low-resource schools must develop a strategy for obtaining supplementary funds. District PE coordinators and principals can help their teachers find and write grants and put aside time for grant writing. Grants can be sought from professional sports clubs, local businesses, or even school and parent teacher associations. Grant monies tend to be spent on equipment. If grants are not available, principals can assign money each year for updating PE equipment. Funds should also be allocated for staff development and special curricula, because these are proven ways to improve PE. Kids like having a variety of activities and equipment to play with, and new equipment keeps them engaged and interested.

If having space for PE is a problem, partnering with a local park or recreation center is a common way to expand facilities.

- **Scheduling enough time for PE is critical.** Principals must prioritize PE and schedule sufficient time. If PE staff has a common prep period together, this helps them coordinate classes and follow common curricula. Principals who make time for PE consider it a priority because it helps increase concentration, discipline and academic performance. To understand the importance of PE, the principal should read the research on the benefits of PE and engage in an exercise program themselves. Non-PE teachers are also likely to support dedicated PE time because the children return to class alert and ready to learn.

“PE is when the school culture comes alive.”
(principal)

- **Ensuring reasonable class size is essential for quality PE.** Principals need to hire enough staff members to have small PE class sizes (about 30 children) or class sizes comparable to other subjects. Small PE classes give children more space to be active and more attention from the teacher to develop skills.
- **Providing nontraditional PE activities makes PE more active and fun for all students.** In some schools, PE mostly focuses on traditional team sports, which usually includes much standing around and waiting. In schools where all students experience success, develop skills and are active for the majority of PE time, modified games and alternative activities are taught. Active, involved PE classes require staff with specialized skills. Training and opportunities to go to conferences or visit other schools with successful programs are needed to develop teacher skills in getting all kids active. District PE coordinators and principals need to be aware of specialized activity-focused programs and

support staff to learn how to adapt traditional games. Teachers should provide a variety of games and activities including ones that are less competitive, keep the whole class active and do not require a high-skill level for success and involvement.

“PE is a lot more than learning to play sports. It is about team building, relationships and communication.”
(principal)

- **Structure and discipline are important for a successful PE program.** Organization and discipline are vital to maximize the time children spend being active and learning in PE. Locker room discipline and dressing out, enforced by the principal, can help set the tone for a PE class. A regular warm-up routine and published lesson plans also help students know what to expect and not waste time transitioning between activities. Clear rules, signals and simple instructions can help PE classes stay orderly.

“We make it fun so it seems like free time, but really it is very structured and disciplined.”
(teacher)

These lessons from administrators and staff of low-resource schools can provide inspiration and instruction for overcoming common barriers to active and enjoyable PE.

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This summary was completed by a team led by James F. Sallis, Ph.D., and Jacqueline Kerr, Ph.D., based at San Diego State University and the Active Living Research Program, UCLA School of Public Health’s Center to Eliminate Health Disparities, and the California Center for Public Health Advocacy. The California Endowment commissioned this report as part of their efforts to improve physical activity, reduce childhood obesity and reduce health disparities in California. Further reports on PE and physical activity in California schools are forthcoming to inform discussions about policies that can improve the quantity and quality of PE.

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