The Pros and Cons of Mandatory Gym Class in Public Schools
Updated June 21, 2016 | by Grace Chen

Gym class is invariably portrayed on the silver screen as a time of awkwardness and embarrassment, when kids have to climb ropes and do a certain number of push-ups in a minute’s time. However, gym class is much different now, and it is not surprising that today’s students and parents are questioning why it’s even a mandatory part of the day. After all, according to a MSNBC investigation, researchers have found that the average high school gym class only keeps students physically active for an average of 16 minutes! In a class period that is about 45 minutes long, that isn’t a lot of active time. In today’s educational climate in which standardized test performance in core subjects carries a significant amount of weight with regard to teacher and school evaluations, “wasting” all that time doing nothing in PE is something districts cannot afford. As such, PE classes have been cut so students can spend more time in core classes.

Supporters of mandatory gym programs contend that physical education classes have a wide range of benefits. According to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, physical education classes help children develop fine and gross motor skills, learn cooperation and teamwork, reduce stress, and improve self-confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, supporters argue that public schools have a responsibility to encourage children to enjoy a healthy and active lifestyle – especially as a rising number of young Americans are obese. Activities that promote muscular strength, cardiovascular endurance and flexibility, they argue, can help reverse the trend of American children gaining weight. Subsequently, some school leaders are left without a clear answer in the debate. Should fitness classes be required to fulfill a school’s curriculum requirements?

Are Physical Education Programs Really Fit?

Further expounding on the issue, MSNBC also analyzes a major study of physical education programs conducted by Cornell University. The study, based on information from 37,000 high school students’ responses to surveys from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reveals that most students do not believe gym class is effective. This has led nearly all states to create and pass new bills to reform public schools’ fitness education programs.

Unfortunately, while many states have increased the amount of time students spend in gym class, Cornell’s study found that adding 200 more minutes of time to gym class each week did not produce substantial changes. Even by adding 200 more weekly minutes, the studies showed that boys generally engaged in only 7.5 minutes of more activity per day, while girls only participated in activity 8 additional minutes each week.

Attempting to explain these disappointing results, Cornell’s lead professor of policy analysis and management asserts, “The rest of the extra gym time is likely spent being sedentary — most likely standing around idly while playing sports like softball or volleyball that don’t require constant movement.” Cornell’s results hit a familiar nerve, as a study of fitness classes in Texas
elementary schools also found that the majority of students spent the class time inactive; specifically, the data suggested that students were only engaging in exercise or movement for approximately 3 minutes during the entire class period.

As reported in USA Today, what would benefit children more is periods of rigorous physical activity that makes them break a sweat. High-energy games like tag and dodge ball are great examples of activities that have little downtime. At a minimum, elementary aged children should get 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day. Middle school and high school students should get 45 minutes of exercise a day. And about half of that time should be spent in activities like those mentioned above that get the heart racing.

Should Schools Discontinue Gym Classes?

Despite the results, the lead professor of the Cornell study does not necessarily believe that gym classes should be banned in public school, arguing, “We’re not saying schools should get rid of (physical education),” but “there has to be a meaningful change in the curriculum.”

While many of the nation’s gym classes may not be performing at peak levels, supporters of fitness education aim to spotlight the potential of reform, as well as the accomplishments many public schools have achieved.

In examining the changing policies of fitness education, it is important to understand how gym classes in public schools could be modernized. While running laps and doing jumping jacks used to be a staple of many physical education classes, many schools have diversified their options to reflect a more modern take on gym class. Schools offer instruction in traditional team sports and games like flag football and red rover, but also emphasize healthy eating habits, the benefits of lifting weights and offer unique experiences from bowling to fly-fishing to kayaking. By offering more intriguing physical activities for students, many public schools are reporting positive feedback from both their students and community members.

Many physical education leaders are arguing for a complete paradigm shift in the area of fitness and wellness instruction. Elizabeth Spletzer, a highly experienced fitness instructor currently coordinating the University of Minnesota’s Physical Education Teacher Licensor program, strives to teach future fitness teachers the diverse learning benefits that children gain from physical activity. Instead of seeing gym class as only a physical activity, reformists like Spletzer want others to understand the psychosocial benefits of exercise, including improved self-esteem, better behavior, and decreased instances of depression and stress. There are academic benefits as well. According to a report by the New York Times, students who are physically active have better attention and focus, improved problem solving abilities, better working memory and a general improvement in both reading and math scores. In fact, the academic benefits students gain from physical activity during the school day appear to outweigh the benefits of increasing class time in subjects such as reading and math.

While schools debate the future of physical education, one fact remains certain: gym class will never look the same again!
http://genprogress.org/voices/2015/09/24/39818/schools-have-been-cutting-back-on-physical-education-but-study-shows-fit-kids-perform-better-academically/

Schools Have Been Cutting Back On Physical Education, But Study Shows Fit Kids Perform Better Academically

By Matt Wotus | September 24, 2015 at 10:30 am

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A report by the Institute of Medicine in 2013 highlighted that schools were reducing the time kids spent engaging in physical activity, but a new study shows that fit kids are more likely to perform better academically, particularly in math.

The report found that due to economic burdens, leading to teacher layoffs, and an absence of equipment, schools were cutting back on physical education classes and recess time for kids.

According to the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, kids need at least an hour of vigorous or moderate-intensity physical activity every day. Even before the cutbacks, though, physical education classes only provided 10-20 minutes of such exercise per gathering.

There are currently no federal requirements regarding physical activity for students, but the Institute of Medicine recommends that physical education classes should be at least 30 minutes for students in elementary school and at least 45 minutes for middle and high school students.

It was also recommended that schools provide additional exercise time through recess and classroom activities that involve physical activity.

While many schools have cut back on physical education classes and recess time, a study published last month in PLOS ONE, a scientific journal within the Public Library of Science, found that kids who are more fit do better in school.

Researchers examined kids ages nine and 10 by asking them to complete standardized math and reading exams and test their endurance a treadmill. They also underwent MRI scans of their brains.

By having the kids complete the mental and physical tests, researchers were able to determine that those who ran for longer periods of time had thinner sections of gray matter in the front of their brains. Such a result indicates more brain maturation.

The brain normally goes through a thinning period during adolescence, as the connections that are not needed are thinned out, according to Charles H. Tillman, one of the study's authors. Fit kids may be further along in the process, as revealed from the outcome of the study.
Kids who ran longer also achieved higher results on the math test. The area of the brain where the thinning of gray matter occurred, known as the frontal cortex, is involved in working memory, which assists in solving math problems.

This study was the first to investigate kids' cortical brain structures and how fitness and gray matter thickness relate to educational success, but results from previous studies have suggested that changes in brain structure also affect reading comprehension and other academic areas.

Matt Wotus is a reporter for Generation Progress, covering health and health care. Follow him on Instagram at @mawotus_27.