

Physical Activity Policy Changes in Schools and School Districts

One of Eight Brief Reports

YEAR 5 EVALUATION OF ARKANSAS ACT 1220 OF 2003 TO COMBAT CHILDHOOD OBESITY

INTRODUCTION

Obesity is recognized as one of the most pressing health threats facing families and communities in Arkansas and in the nation overall. Arkansas Act 1220 of 2003, which mandated statewide policy changes aimed at preventing childhood obesity, prohibited schools from using physical activity as a punishment and encouraged them to promote their physical activity programs to families. This brief report presents key findings from the Year 5 evaluation of policies and practices related to physical activity in Arkansas public schools.

As in previous years, our research team at the Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences conducted the evaluation with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. More details from the Year 5 evaluation and complete evaluation reports for Years 1-4 are available at: www.uams.edu/coph/reports/#Obesity.

KEY FINDINGS: PHYSICAL ACTIVITY POLICIES AND PRACTICES

District Policies Regarding Student Physical Education and Physical Activity

School districts continued to enact policies that prohibited use of physical activity as a punishment and required lifetime physical activities to be included in physical education curricula.

- The percentage of school districts that prohibited schools from using physical activity as punishment for bad behavior in physical education classes nearly doubled since the passage of the Act, from 24 percent in Year 1 to 46 percent in Year 5.
- The percentage of school districts that required elementary schools to include lifetime physical activities in their physical education curricula increased from 39 percent in Year 1 to 48 percent in Year 5.



- In Year 5, 88 percent of districts required new physical education teachers hired by elementary schools be certified to teach physical education, a significant increase from 69 percent in Year 1. More than 90 percent of districts required certification for physical education teachers in middle and high schools.
- In Year 5, 35 percent of school districts required schools to measure physical fitness levels on a regular basis, up from 26 percent in Year 1.

District Efforts to Promote Physical Activity Programming

School districts continued to expand their efforts to inform students' families about their physical education and physical activity programs.

- In Year 5, 69 percent of schools provided students' families with information regarding their physical education and activity programs, compared with 51 percent in Year 1.
- The percentage of schools that offered physical activity programs to families nearly tripled since the passage of the Act, from 13 percent in Year 1 to 36 percent in Year 5.

SUMMARY OF SCHOOL DISTRICT PHYSICAL ACTIVITY POLICIES

| District policies | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|
| Physical education/physical activity | | | | | |
| Policy prohibiting use of physical activity as punishment for bad behavior in: | | | | | |
| Physical education classes**** | 24% | 28% | 39% | 39% | 46% |
| Other classes*** | 32% | 31% | 44% | 41% | 49% |
| Policy requiring lifetime physical activities be included in physical education program | | | | | |
| Elementary schools**** | 39% | 36% | 47% | 56% | 48% |
| Middle schools | 52% | 44% | 57% | 63% | 55% |
| High schools | 56% | 45% | 59% | 66% | 57% |
| Policy requiring student fitness levels be measured on a regular basis | | | | | |
| | 26% | 28% | 37% | 37% | 35% |
| Policy requiring that newly hired physical education teachers be certified to teach physical education | | | | | |
| Elementary schools**** | 69% | 64% | 74% | 86% | 88% |
| Middle schools | 87% | 85% | 86% | 91% | 92% |
| High schools | 88% | 87% | 87% | 91% | 93% |

* p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001; ****p ≤ .0001

The policies that appear in bold print in this table were either required or recommended by the Arkansas Department of Education.

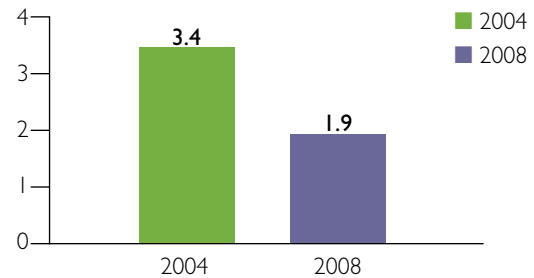
Changes to the Physical Activity Environment at School

Schools continued to support policies regarding the certification of physical education teachers, and the percentage of students who reported participating in physical education remained significantly lower than in Year 1.

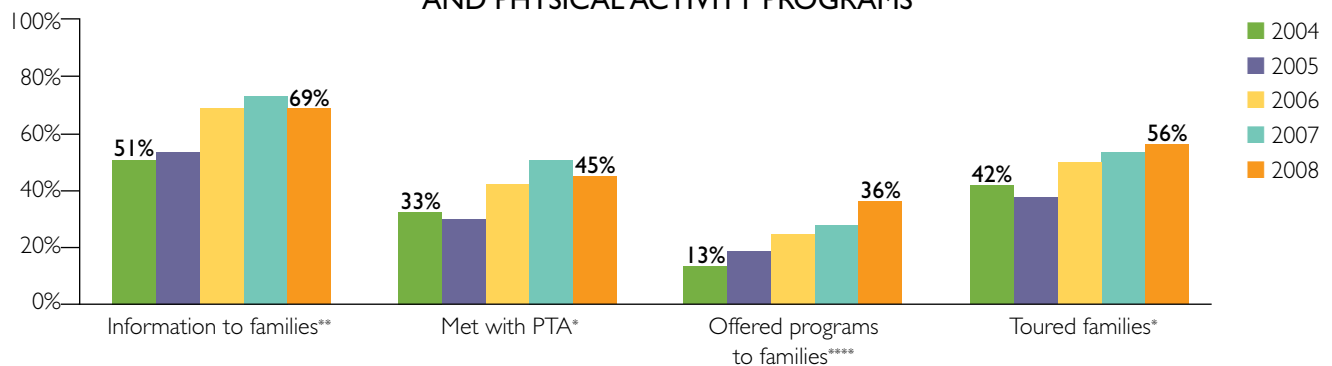
- The percentage of schools that required newly hired physical education teachers to be certified for the subject increased from 84 percent in Year 1 to 95 percent in Year 5.
- The percentage of physical education classes that were taught by non-certified or regular classroom teachers declined since Year 1.

- According to self-reported data, adolescent students participated in physical education classes an average of only 1.9 days per week in Year 5, a significant decrease from 3.4 in Year 1.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS PER WEEK STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN PE CLASSES

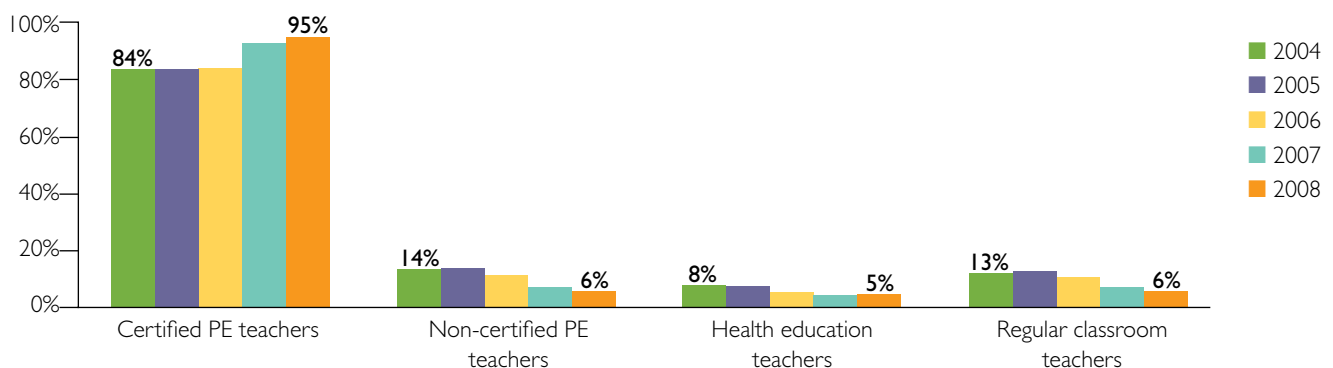


ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE SCHOOL PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAMS



*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001; ****p ≤ .0001

PERCENTAGE OF PE CLASSES TAUGHT BY CERTIFIED PE TEACHERS



Key Informant Interviews

Year 5 interviews with school nurses, principals, superintendents and Wellness Committee members revealed a wide range of opinions regarding physical education and physical activity practices that took place during the school day. Members of each informant group generally endorsed the belief that it is important for schools to provide physical education to students. In fact, many school nurses were in favor of increasing the amount of physical activity schools provide. School nurses and Wellness Committee members were particularly vocal about their support for increased periods of physical activity, and less sedentary time during physical education classes, as well as the inclusion of lifetime physical activity in physical education curricula. Superintendents and principals, however, typically felt that students' current level of physical education was sufficient. Some informants also had strong positive and negative reactions to Act 317 of 2007, which reduced both physical activity and physical education requirements.

Informants also described some of the challenges they faced in implementing policy changes. For instance, principals and superintendents continued to express concern about the fiscal impact of hiring certified physical education teachers, as their salaries are generally higher than non-certified teachers. While a large percentage of informants stressed that finding available time during the school day was the biggest challenge for adding physical education or physical activity into the curricula, superintendents and other school personnel described several methods they used to integrate physical activity into the school day, including:

- providing more structured activity during recess, as opposed to only free play time;
- adding classes, such as track and field;
- incorporating physical activity into classroom activities;
- decorating sidewalks for physical activity games and holding “fun days”;
- allocating time for physical activity during part of the lunch period after students have finished eating; and
- walking programs, such as Walk Across America.