

Elementary Physical Education: Status & Concerns
State Board of Education
11.14.2019

Through the 1970s and well into the 1980s, Tennessee elementary schools were rich in physical education, many with 3-4 days per week of instructional physical education. There were time requirements for all subjects, including special area classes, as per communications to all schools from the Department of Education. Then time requirements were dropped for all subjects, with individual districts making the decisions pertaining to required time for academics and special area/related arts. This was followed by time requirements for classroom instruction in academics, with the time allotted for special area classes being, “sufficient to meet the state standards for that discipline” (SBOE), a policy that is still in place today.

The standards movement for education began in the early 1990s with national standards for physical education being adopted in 1995. Beginning in 2000 grade-level benchmarks/standards* were developed to further define what students should master, in physical education what students should know and be able to do. Most states, including Tennessee, aligned their state physical education standards with those at the national level.

With the standards movement came increased emphasis on standardized test scores as states moved from the introduction of grade-level standards, to *No Child Left Behind*, to the *Core Curriculum*, to teacher evaluations being directly linked to student test scores (with special area/related arts teachers choosing classroom scores of either mathematics or reading for a percentage of their evaluation score). Thus, the perfect storm was created for an increased emphasis on academics and a decreased emphasis on the non-tested areas, one of which was physical education.

The results of the perfect storm: Physical education in the public schools of Tennessee was reduced to 1 day per week, with very few exceptions to this statistic: one day per week for students to master the 20 discrete motor skills (throwing, catching, volleying, kicking, striking, etc.) in addition to the 17 cognitive, fitness, responsibility and affective skills. That is a total of 37 standards per grade level to be mastered in 1 class period per week.

*Tennessee DOE lists standards by grade levels. Previously they were titled as grade level outcomes or performance indicators.

In 2013 Tennessee ranked #3 in the nation in childhood obesity. **Tennessee now ranks #1 in the nation for childhood obesity!** (Knox County Health Department just reported 1 in 4 middle school students in Knox County Schools are overweight or obese—10/24, WBIR News). Yes, this is middle school—middle school obesity begins in the years of elementary school.

Can we say the rise in obesity for our children is a direct result of the reduction in physical education? No, such “control group” research is not possible with human subjects; however, we can wonder if there is a direct correlation.

The perfect storm is seeded with 2 additional factors, #1 of which is RTI, the state adopted program of remediation for those children with special needs. When developed by Fuchs and Fuchs at Vanderbilt, the program was designed with 3 tiers, with 80% of the students in a regular classroom receiving sufficient instruction from the classroom teacher, 15% in need of additional assistance (small group instruction, tutoring, etc. within the classroom setting) and 5% of students requiring intensive assistance. You don't need a review of RTI. However, this part you may not be aware of:

Elementary school administrators, in their attempts to address students' needs, pulled special area teachers from their classrooms/gymnasiums, and placed them in the classrooms to assist with the teaching of mathematics and reading. The special area teachers, including physical education, are placed in the classroom for the first 45 minutes of the day—some longer, some shorter periods of time, thus reducing the special area teaching time by 45 minutes per day.

Which raises the question: Are physical education teachers licensed to teach in the classroom? Do they have an endorsement in elementary education? Physical education teachers remarks to me: I didn't go to college to become a reading specialist; I went four years of college to teach children the skills of physical education.

The administrator's response: We are evaluated by test scores. I must have everyone to assist.

The second factor that has seeded the storm: rotational schedules. How do rotational schedules affect physical education? A school week is defined by most as Monday-Friday, five days per calendar week. With a rotational schedule academics in the classroom are still under the structure of the five-day calendar week; however, special area/related arts, fit within this five-day calendar week only if there are five special area classes, all with identical class time, e.g., 60 minutes. Thus, if a school has physical education, music, art, library, technology, and guidance, that school will require 6 days to meet the related arts schedule, i.e., a six-day rotational schedule. Some elementary schools in the state are on an eight-day rotational schedule. This means children have physical education one time every eight school days!

All of the above raises the question, "Why are 2 days so important? Isn't 60 minutes still 60 minutes whether in two classes per week or one?"

The research on distributed practice is overwhelming for learning, especially for performance skills. Ask yourself, "What would reading be if students read (instruction and/or practice) only one day per week? What would your golf/tennis game be if you practice only one time per week, especially when the skill is new learning? What would your fitness level be if you exercise only one day per week? Motor development research supports concentrated instruction for introduction followed by distributed practice with feedback for maximum student learning, i.e., two days per week are better than a one day per week for maximum learning.

Why is obesity important? Isn't it just a cosmetic issue? Yes, our children are larger than in years past; yes, adults are larger sizes than before. We will adjust. Look at the fashion industry. They have adjusted with larger models displaying the latest fashion. We have adjusted sizes so a lady of fashion still wears a size 10 regardless of weight gain and increased body size.

Obesity is more than a cosmetic issue. Obesity is a health issue. Type 1 diabetes, cholesterol, blood pressure and a host of other disorders are all associated with obesity. (We are a nation that thinks there is a pill or a surgery for any disorder that might occur. Try telling that to a young adult being wheeled into the surgical unit for amputation of a leg due to diabetes.) The cause was preventable; the amputation is permanent.

During the summer of 2018, I spoke with the Summer Study group of legislators and district superintendents on the need for physical education for children. After my presentation the chairman of the Summer Study said, "Ms. Hale, no one in this room will disagree with you on the importance of physical education for children. But the cost is prohibitive and there's just not enough hours in the day to do what you are suggesting. Let me address those two issues as they are the strongest and the most common voiced by superintendents and principals across the state:

-The cost will be prohibitive. I will have to hire additional teachers. The 2019 survey, conducted by CSH/DOE shows there are physical education teachers in place in all but 8 elementary schools in the state. BEF funding provides the teachers. There is no shortage of elementary physical education teachers.

-There are not enough hours in the school day. The 6 ½ hour school day provides sufficient time daily for all the recommendations/requirements of all academics (SBOE), 60 minutes of special area/related arts classes, recess, lunch. While Tier 1 requires no additional remediation, Tier 2 adds an extra 30 minutes for language arts/reading and 30 minutes for mathematics, all of which, in addition to the above, fit within the 6 ½ hour school day. Time is not an issue.

I don't need to tell you the importance of quality classroom instruction and student learning; you are facing the issue at the moment with recent media coverage of "The Nation's Report Card." My purpose is not in anyway to decrease classroom student learning.

Student learning in academics and physical education are not mutually exclusive. Children's health does not have to be sacrificed to produce academically proficient students. What I am asking you to consider is an added policy in the state regulations that addresses, "For those subjects/disciplines/areas in the elementary curriculum with a performance component (physical education, music) more than one day per week is recommended with time requirements fitting within the designated school day.

not less than 2 days per week is recommended

at least 2 days per week is recommended

two or more days per week

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