

Daily PE Class a Remnant of the Past?

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At Moore Elementary School, fourth-grader Michael Turri looks forward to 30 minutes of jump-rope at the start of the day. "It really gets my brain going," said the 10-year-old. "You need to do this stuff to get through life."

That's one of the approaches this suburban Nashville school takes to thwart a growing childhood obesity problem. Students at Moore are required to take PE every day. Now, some state lawmakers are pointing to Moore as a model for the state in a plan to set tougher physical education standards for all schools.

"Our students are a little less overweight, and their academic scores are high," said Moore Elementary PE teacher Kathy Clark. "I want the same for every student in Tennessee."

Few States Require Daily PE Classes

Illinois is the only state that requires PE every day from kindergarten through high school. In Alabama, it's a must until eighth grade, according to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education.

In other states — California, Kentucky, Maine, Missouri, New York, South Carolina and Vermont — standards are being developed for health and PE programs.

In 2003 only 28 percent of U.S. high school students attended a daily PE class, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports. About 38 percent watched TV for three hours or more each school night.

Before Tennessee dropped PE in 1992 — under pressure to focus on the basics — students had to take 30 minutes a day until fourth grade, two hours a week until eighth grade and one high school credit. Now, elementary and middle schools require only some physical activity, and high schools have so-called "lifetime wellness" classes — a combination of health and physical education.

But there's no set time or curriculum, said state Sen. Bill Ketron, a Murfreesboro Republican who's sponsoring a bill to make daily PE mandatory again.

Costs Hamper Schools' Efforts

An effort at stricter PE standards has been slowed by cost, because many schools would probably have to hire more teachers. A compromise would expand a pilot health program to all school districts. The health program — which includes counseling, health and nutrition services — would simply encourage all students to build strength and flexibility and take part in aerobic exercise to develop lifetime health habits.

"What good is an education if you don't have your health," asks Ketron.

Gov. Phil Bredesen has said he wants to spend \$45 million over the next three years to fight diabetes and obesity. Tennessee is third in the nation for childhood obesity and among the top five for Type II diabetes in children, according to the American Heart Association.

Ketron and health officials believe added activity would not only improve physical fitness, but test scores as well. A California study shows that students who have PE in school do better in math and reading than those who do not, according to the heart association.

Doug Winborn, professor of health and human performance at Middle Tennessee State University, said the successful program at Moore Elementary proves that PE doesn't crowd out academics.

"In Franklin, they are consistently at the top of the state in standardized testing," Winborn said. "We hoped other school systems would see the light and follow suit, but it appears the only way to have a daily physical education is to mandate it."