

Mandatory P.E. Class Not Enough to Fight Fat

By Nancy Armour, Associated Press

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The gym at Eberhart Elementary School is bright and spacious - with high ceilings, several basketball hoops, even a large, colorful climbing wall.

But for much of the day, the gym doubles as a cafeteria where the school's 1,800-plus students are offered breakfast and lunch.

There's another gym on the fourth floor, but it's so old it has basketball hoops attached to ladders. Time and space limitations mean each class gets physical education just once a week for 40 minutes.

In the fight against childhood obesity, getting kids moving is one of the most effective ways to combat the problem. But only Illinois and Massachusetts require P.E. classes for all kids in kindergarten through 12th grade. And, as Eberhart's example shows, even those requirements sometimes are not enough.

"I understand the funding issue. I understand the space issue," said Betty Hale, one of two P.E. teachers at Eberhart. But "our children are getting shortchanged."

Illinois first adopted P.E. requirements in 1915, and the state has been mandating physical education for all grades since 1957. But those rules have not prevented Illinois kids from getting heavier. An estimated 20.7 percent of 10- to 17-year-olds in Illinois are obese, according to a 2007 survey released last month by the Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. That's the fourth-highest rate in the country, behind only Mississippi, Georgia and Kentucky.

Nationwide, an estimated 32 percent of American kids ages 2 to 19 are overweight, including 17 percent who are obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Illinois mandates gym class but does not have a standardized P.E. curriculum, meaning what counts as physical education can vary widely. For instance, kids at Eberhart on Chicago's West Side play kickball once a week in a cluttered, 100-year-old gym. Meanwhile, students in suburban Niles are high jumping in a gym that includes a weight room with better equipment than some health clubs.

The state does not monitor schools to ensure they are meeting the daily P.E. requirement, and there are no penalties for not doing it. The Illinois General Assembly even gives waivers to districts that have financial issues or want more classroom time.

But it's the health of the kids that tells the full depth of the problem.

When Hale arrived at Eberhart 10 years ago, most kids could run a mile in 13 or 14 minutes. Now only a few can.

At Louisiana State University in New Orleans, professor Melinda Sothern sees children at the school's Health Sciences Center with a range of related problems more typical of adults: high cholesterol, diabetes, muscular-skeletal disorders.

"What really hurts me is they never have that euphoric feeling I had as a child of riding their bike down the street. They just don't have the stamina to do it," said Sothern, a former gym teacher.

Physical fitness "is just so not valued today. And it's what would turn this thing around."

Health experts recommend 30 minutes of daily physical education for elementary school students, and 45 minutes for those in junior high and high school. But in a recent CDC study, less than 4 percent of elementary schools, less than 8 percent of middle schools and just over 2 percent of high schools required daily P.E. for all students for the entire school year.

At Eberhart, the weekly 40-minute period passes quickly.

By the time a class of fifth-graders settled down and did their warm-up calisthenics recently, more than five minutes had passed. It took another five minutes for Hale to split the class into teams and give them a quick refresher on how to play kickball, and there were still more interruptions during the game to explain the rules.

With no money for new equipment, the kids use a ball worn to the point of crumbling, and the floor is soon strewn with little bits of yellow foam. The wooden pins for bowling look like something out of the school's time capsule.

The facilities are lacking as well - and not simply because the one gym can only be used part-time. Hale's classes were kicked out of the older gym the previous week because of a space camp, and leftover garbage still cluttered one corner: two black plastic bags stuffed to the brim, a blue plastic barrel, a Styrofoam cooler and two cardboard boxes - one with a crumpled Doritos bag inside.

Having P.E. "even twice a week would make a world of difference," Hale said. "These kids need to move. Exercise is just as important as sitting down and learning their math, their science, their reading."

Some educators complain that physical education - along with art and music - has been squeezed out by No Child Left Behind, which prods schools to boost the performance of low-achieving students. With annual math and reading tests, many schools are trying to find extra teaching time wherever they can.

But doing it at the expense of physical education is misguided, said Russell Pate, associate vice president for Health Sciences at the University of South Carolina. Studies have long shown that giving kids time to play, both through P.E. and recess, does not hurt their test scores, Pate said. In fact, the breaks could help.

"I'm all for holding schools to high standards with regard to academic outcomes," Pate said. "But we need to have some balance. We need our schools to be healthy places for kids."

That's the approach at the elementary and middle schools in District 64 in Park Ridge and Niles, suburbs on the northwest side of Chicago. Three of the eight schools in the district received the National Association for Sports and Physical Education's STARS award for outstanding P.E. programs; they are the only schools in Illinois to earn the recognition.

There are no vending machines with candy or soda at any of the schools, and the food service at the middle schools gives students healthy choices.

Elementary classes have P.E. for a half-hour four days a week, and gym-like activities at recess on the fifth day. Middle school students have P.E. for 40 minutes each day. The curriculum is designed to get students moving and appeal to everyone, regardless of athletic ability. There are units on everything from softball to wrestling to field hockey.

Grades are based on kids' preparation for class - being on time and in uniform - as well as written tests on the sports they learn. There are fitness tests twice a year, but instead of telling kids they must run a mile in a specific time or do 50 sit-ups, progress is measured against previous results. The results are not counted in their grades.

"We want them to gain an appreciation of being active, to enjoy being active," said Aaron Schauer, who teaches at Emerson Middle School and is the district's P.E. curriculum specialist. "So when they're on their own, they'll make active choices."

The facilities are top-of-the-line, starting with a 26-person P.E. department for the eight schools. Each school has ready access to green space, and there's enough room outside to hold six soccer fields.

When students at Emerson want to track their heart rates while running or walking, they can use one of 32 Polar monitors, which retail for \$60.

"Physical education cannot be expected to solve society's obesity problems," said Pate, a past president of the National Coalition on Promoting Physical Activity.

"But I do think it's realistic to expect P.E. to help solve the problem."