

Why All Schools Should Require More P.E.

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Are multiplication tables more important than our children's health? Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell seems to think so. He vetoed a bill yesterday that would have required all elementary and middle school students in Virginia to participate in 150 minutes of physical activity a week, in addition to recess.

McDonnell says the bill is an "unfunded mandate," according to The Washington Post, citing concerns about the cost of implementation. Other opponents worry about placing the burden of solving our country's childhood obesity crisis on our public schools.

While these concerns are understandable, they don't justify a veto. Government funding is largely a matter of priority, and by passing the bill, McDonnell would have demonstrated to the people of Virginia that the state is serious about children's health. The reality of implementation would have lent urgency to a problem that we as a country have let languish for far too long.

Plus, consider these sobering statistics: According to the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health, on a national level, "the direct costs of childhood obesity include annual prescription drug, emergency room, and outpatient costs of \$14.1 billion, plus inpatient costs of \$237.6 million" (emphasis mine).

In Virginia, 24 percent of children are on Medicaid and one in three is overweight or obese. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Virginia has the 14th-highest obesity-related health care costs in the 50 states. Clearly, the childhood obesity epidemic is already costing the Virginia government a significant chunk of money--so why refuse to invest money in a long-term solution?

It's important to remember that the bill is not the only solution. Childhood obesity is a multi-pronged problem that requires a multi-pronged plan of attack. As opponents of the bill rightly point out, schools certainly can't be expected to shoulder the entire burden of "fixing" the problem, but they can still play an important role. According to McDonnell, "Kids need to get off the couch and away from the computer and onto a soccer field or basketball court... Our young people should be taught by parents, teachers and mentors about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and to pick active, rather than passive, recreational activities."

Isn't this bill explicitly about getting kids onto the soccer field or basketball court? The government cannot control what children choose to do in their free time, but it can inspire a passion for sports and physical activity by ensuring that kids have sufficient time to play soccer, basketball, and other games during school hours. Extracurricular programs to encourage healthy lifestyles may also be beneficial, as McDonnell notes, but they alone will not solve the childhood obesity epidemic.

McDonnell has also cited concerns that the physical education requirement would "exceed the time dedicated to any other subject in our public school system, and potentially cut into crucial time in the classroom needed for instruction in math, science, history and reading."

McDonnell clearly hasn't seen, or is choosing to ignore, the many recent studies proving that physical activity and recess actually boost student performance in the classroom. In April 2010, *USA Today* reported on a government review of research showing that "increased time in PE classes can help children's attention,

concentration and achievement test scores." In addition to promoting physical health, regular outdoor play profoundly impacts our children's emotional, social, and cognitive development.

The state of Virginia had a tremendous opportunity to not only improve the health and happiness of its children, but also to set a precedent that other states would be inspired to follow. Shame on Governor McDonnell for passing it up.