

Keeping Kids Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn

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Studies showing the strong link between physical fitness and academic achievement have been a major development in recent years. A steady stream of research is showing a strong link between a student's physical fitness and ability to learn. These studies range from the effect of simple calisthenics on retaining a daily lesson to strong associations with aerobic fitness and performance on state reading and math tests.

Last year we teamed up with Lincoln Public Schools on a research study which was published in the Journal of Pediatrics (www.jpeds.com/content/JPEDSRauner). The study showed that our students who passed the district aerobic fitness test were much

more likely to pass the Nebraska State tests on math and reading. The effect was strong and consistent regardless of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

There are basically three opportunities for elementary students to have physical activity during the school day: physical education class (the most effective), recess, and classroom activities. Unfortunately, physical education time has fallen dramatically since many of us adults were in school. We are now at a point where most of our elementary schools provide less than half of the 150 minutes of weekly physical education recommended by the Institute of Medicine to maintain minimum levels of health for our children. Some elementary students have physical education class only once every seven school days.

So, we know that physical education makes stu-

dents fit, healthy, and ready to learn. Why aren't we changing the school curriculum? There are three main reasons - No Child Left Behind prioritization of reading and math time, a short school day, and lack of adequate gym space.

Fears of not meeting adequate yearly progress on math and reading scores have led to an increase in curriculum time for students struggling in math and reading at the expense of time for other areas such as physical education. We are now realizing that cutting physical education time to make room for more math and reading time is likely counterproductive.

Another problem is the short length of our elementary school day which is only 6 hours and 38 minutes long. With our current allotment of math and reading minutes, this doesn't leave much time available for other coursework that is

also important for our children's development such as art, music, and physical education.

However, even if we had the time, many of our elementary and middle schools simply don't have the available gym space. The reason our elementary school with the least amount of weekly physical education is so low, is because the gym space built for the school is only half the amount needed for the size of the school.

Given these new developments, it is time for our community and school system to start working on ways to get more physical activity and physical education into the school day to benefit both our children's health and their academic performance!

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PURE AND
SIMPLE.**

