

# Alaska Obesity Facts: Physical Education Policies & Practices

## WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT PHYSICAL EDUCATION (PE)?

- 1 out of every 3 children in Alaska are overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup>
- Regular physical activity promotes health and reduces the risk of developing chronic diseases and obesity in both youth and adults.<sup>2</sup>
- PE is taught in a comprehensive, sequential, and coordinated manner to teach students the skills to be physically active throughout their lives.
- Regular physical activity at school, including PE, leads to many academic benefits including improved classroom behavior, grades and standardized test scores.<sup>3</sup>
- 99% of Alaska parents think elementary school students should have PE in school and 71% think students should be offered at least 150 minutes of PE a week.<sup>4</sup>

## PHYSICAL EDUCATION POLICY SCAN

In 2014 the State of Alaska Obesity Prevention and Control Program collected and reviewed PE policies from more than 90% (51) of Alaska's school districts and conducted key informant interviews with staff from all 54 districts about district PE policies and practices.

While results from the scan may not reflect school level practice, the results provide a baseline of statewide PE policies and practices and mark the first such comprehensive review in Alaska school districts.

## PE GUIDELINES: HOW DOES ALASKA MEASURE UP?

To support quality PE, the Society for Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) recommends certain state level PE policies.<sup>5</sup> The following are policy recommendations from SHAPE (in Italics) followed by the results from the 2014 Alaska PE Policy Scan:

- ***Each state should have PE Standards.***
  - Alaska adopted PE Standards in 2010.<sup>6</sup>
- ***PE should be mandatory for all grades.***
  - 53% of districts report having written policies requiring PE in elementary and middle schools.
  - 85% of districts report having written policies requiring PE in high schools.
  - Alaska requires 1 credit of either PE, health, or a combination for high school graduation.
- ***PE should be taught by teachers certified or licensed in PE.***
  - 83% of districts report requiring that elementary PE classes are taught by certified PE teachers.
  - 22% of districts report requiring that middle and high school PE classes are taught by certified PE teachers.
- ***Professional development in PE should be required to maintain PE teacher certification.***
  - 63% of districts report that PE teachers do **not** receive regular professional development in PE.
  - Several districts report that regular professional development is cost prohibitive.
- ***The use of waivers, exemptions, substitutions, and/or pass-fail options for PE should be prohibited.***
  - 50% of districts report allowing waivers, exemptions, or substitutions.
  - Districts report considering extracurricular activities, correspondence school, other class work, and student's preference when approving waivers, exemptions or substitutions.

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**Overall, Alaska's schools are working toward strong PE policies.**

- 85% of districts report following Alaska or National PE Standards.
- While only 53% of districts report having written policies requiring PE in elementary and middle schools, the percentage increases to over 80% when reported practice is included.

**Despite this progress, significant challenges remain.**

- Districts reported many challenges to providing quality PE including limited funding, limited staffing, high cost of equipment, and few local opportunities for professional development.
- School districts in the state vary greatly in size and geography. Understanding this diversity is important when considering how school districts function in providing education, including PE, across the state.

## **What Can Alaska Schools Do?**

- Maintain an active school wellness council, evaluate the implementation of school wellness policies and make evidence-based improvements.
- Include recommended PE policy language from the State of Alaska Gold Standard Wellness policy in school wellness policies.<sup>7</sup>
- Adopt a PE curriculum that includes student assessments. Assess existing PE curricula using the CDC Physical Education Curriculum Analysis Tool (PECAT) to compare implemented curricula with national standards for high quality content and identify areas for improvement.<sup>8</sup>

## **School Wellness Policies**

are school/district-based physical activity and nutrition policies created to reduce childhood obesity. All districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program are required to have a USDA compliant wellness policy.<sup>9</sup>

## **What Can Health Care Providers, Individuals and Communities Do?**

- Become familiar with your school's wellness policy and explore ways to get involved and support your school's programs, practices and policies.
- Participate in school-based wellness councils to provide input in the development of programs and policies to address childhood obesity prevention in schools.
- Advocate for childhood obesity prevention efforts and policies that promote good nutrition and physical activity.

## **REFERENCES**

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