



The
City
Project

Physical Education is a Right: The Los Angeles Unified School District Case Study

Samuels & Associates and The City Project present the Policy Report *Physical Education is a Right: The Los Angeles Unified School District Case Study (2011)*. The Report assesses the implementation and impact of the plan adopted by the district in response to an organizing and legal campaign to provide quality physical education under education and civil rights laws.

The physical education campaign and plan in the district are replicable in other school districts throughout the state and nation. While the specific circumstances in other districts may vary, the lessons learned in Los Angeles through the process of campaign, complaint, resolution, plan and implementation are broadly applicable.

“The physical education plan adopted by the Los Angeles Unified School District is a best practice example for districts across the state to provide a quality education for the children of California,” according to Dr. Robert Ross, President of The California Endowment. “Research tells us physically active and fit kids get better grades and have better overall health.”

The complete policy report is available for download at www.cityprojectca.org/blog/archives/11646.

Background

In California, public schools are required to provide physical education under laws requiring at least 20 minutes on average per day in elementary schools, and at least 40 minutes on average per day in middle and high schools. Physical education is good policy and good law: physical education gets students physically active; helps reduce obesity; promotes the sound development of the child; prepares students with the skills, knowledge and confidence to be physically active throughout their lives; and can contribute to academic performance and positive behavior in and out of school.



Photo by Tim Wagner for Partnership for the Public's Health

Yet of over 1,000 public school districts in the state, 188 were audited from 2004--09 and exactly half were not enforcing physical education minute requirements. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the largest public school district in California and the second largest in the nation, was audited several times between 2004 and 2009, and each audit found that the district did not enforce physical education minute requirements. The district serves over 670,000 K-12 students in over 900 schools. 92% are students of color, and 74% are low income (qualify for free or reduced-price meals). Obesity rates in the district were persistently higher than the obesity rates of other districts within the county. 75% of district students failed to pass all six tests on the state Fitnessgram exam in the 2008/2009 school year.

In 2007, a diverse coalition of teachers, parents, community activists, health advocates, attorneys and school officials united in a strategic campaign to improve the quantity and quality of physical education in the district and alleviate health disparities. The district adopted a physical education implementation plan to enforce physical education and civil rights principles and laws, based in significant part on the social science research documenting the value of P.E., as well as health disparities.

“It’s a joy to see kids be out doing different things like learning rules for foursquare, hopscotch and doing different relays at basketball. I love seeing the variety that teachers are now using from the PE sessions we did at staff meetings.”

The Physical Education Campaign

The physical education campaign consists of five major components:

1. United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), the teacher’s union in the district, worked with The City Project, a nonprofit legal and policy advocacy organization, and others to raise awareness among students, parents, teachers, principals, and district officials about the value of physical education, its lack in district schools, and health disparities.
2. Parents, teachers, youth groups, and health advocacy organizations, in consultation with attorneys at The City Project, filed administrative complaints to require the district to provide quality physical education under education and civil rights laws.
3. In response to the campaign, the board of education unanimously passed a resolution to comply with physical education

and civil rights requirements.

4. The district adopted the plan designed to ensure that schools meet the physical education minute requirements, provide properly credentialed physical education teachers, maintain reasonable class size averages, provide quality facilities for physical education and comply with education and civil rights laws and principles.
5. Advocates presented evidence-based social science research documenting the value of physical education, and disparities in health and access to physical education based on race, color, national origin, income, and poverty, to support each of the other elements of the campaign.

Perceptions of the Physical Education Campaign

According to stakeholder survey participants, among the most important outcomes of the campaign was the increase in awareness of the importance of physical education, and a greater understanding of the requirements of California's education and civil rights laws. Stakeholders also believed that the administrative complaints were a powerful tool because they directly pointed out that inadequate and inequitable provision of physical education violates education and civil rights law, and action was required to correct these deficiencies.



Parents, students, teachers and health and social justice advocates gather to support the physical education resolution, July 8, 2008

Stakeholders felt the campaign was ultimately successful, with advocates overcoming significant challenges. Some of these challenges were creating awareness of the value of physical education among the community, as well as lack of awareness of the district's inadequate physical education. Despite these challenges, stakeholders reported that many teachers have begun providing more physical education to their students as a result of training sessions provided under the plan.

“The message you send to the public and parents if you don’t enforce the law is that children don’t matter. Standing up for children by actively enforcing the law on their behalf was crucial.”

Measuring Implementation

In addition to assessing the impact of the campaign through the stakeholder interviews, trained observers visited 34 randomly selected elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the district, to evaluate the direct effects of the physical education plan on the quantity and quality of physical education students receive. The evaluation included interviews with the principal and physical education teachers at each school visited, as well as eyewitness observations and reports on actual physical education classes.

Results

One out of every four schools visited reported making changes to their physical education program after learning of the implementation plan. These changes included reducing class sizes, increasing the number of physical education instructors, and attempting to include more active time in physical education classes. Average class sizes in middle and high school were reported as larger than average elementary school class sizes. The average number of minutes of physical education reported in elementary schools was slightly below the required 20 minutes, while the average in middle and high schools was above the required 40 minutes.

Implications

The physical education campaign serves as a best practice example for districts throughout California to provide quality physical education for all students. The physical education plan has significant implications not only for the students in the district, but for every public school student in the state. The anticipated long term outcomes are myriad: the quantity and quality of physical activity will increase; students will learn lifelong lessons on the importance of physical activity; students' health and academic performance will improve; the district will be responsive to the demands of the community; the district will comply with the law. Some of these outcomes are already apparent.