Reducing Obesity Rates in Illinois: The Path to Enhanced Physical Education

Obesity rates in the United States have risen significantly in the last few decades. In Illinois in particular, nearly two thirds (62%) of adult residents are overweight or obese. More than a quarter (27%) of Illinois adolescents were overweight or obese, and only 24 percent of adolescents and teens were physically active for at least 60 minutes per day. This is despite the fact that nearly 70 percent of students attended daily physical education classes in an average week.

In 2010, Illinois developed a State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) in an effort to identify priority health issues and prevention-based strategies to improve the health of all Illinois residents. The SHIP identified nine priority health concerns, one of which was obesity rates in Illinois. The improvement plan calls for the implementation of individual, family, environmental, and policy interventions to increase physical activity as a key strategy to address obesity.

Identifying an Appropriate Evidence-Based Strategy

With information from the SHIP, the Illinois Public Health Institute and the Illinois Department of Public Health called together voluntary partners from multiple organizations, including the Illinois State Board of Education, the Illinois legislature, Healthy Schools, the American Heart Association, and other health organizations to identify an evidence-based intervention strategy that would address the SHIP obesity priority by increasing physical activity. This newly-created task force reviewed evidence-based strategies in The Guide to Community Preventive Services (The Community Guide) and decided that enhanced school-based physical education (enhanced P.E.) was the most appropriate method to implement for a couple of reasons. First, it lent itself well to policy approaches and encouraged engagement from multiple partners within both the health and education sectors. Secondly, it was similar to pre-existing initiatives, such as the Obesity Action Roadmaps from the Illinois Alliance to Prevent Obesity.

The Illinois school system comprises more than 800 independent school districts, including nearly 4,500 schools and serves more than two million children. To enact an intervention on such a large scale, the first step was to engage local decision makers in understanding the importance of physical activity to wellness in order to implement an enhanced P.E. program in Illinois schools. The goal was to create a cultural shift that makes high quality P.E. a priority for all schools in order for students to realize the lifetime benefits of exercise and fitness. To realize this goal, the voluntary task force produced a plan to partner with local superintendents, school boards, and principals to implement the use of enhanced P.E. programs for all schools in Illinois.

What is Enhanced P.E.?

Enhanced P.E. is recommended by the Community Guide Task Force based on strong evidence of its effectiveness in improving physical activity levels and physical fitness among children and adolescents. Other positive effects associated with school-based P.E. include increases in physical activity knowledge and increased muscular endurance. Enhanced P.E. entails increasing the amount of time students spend in moderate to vigorous physical activity while in P.E. class to at least 50 percent of class time. Extensive research shows that children who are more physically active and fit also have improved cognitive function, perform better in class and on standardized tests, and have better classroom behaviors. These outcomes are important to school and district administrators as they strive to meet rigorous standards for students’ academic achievement.
Lessons Learned

- **Evidence-based interventions can appeal to many audiences.** Enhanced school-based P.E. appeals to educators because it improves students’ physical activity levels and fitness, which research suggests may help improve students’ academic performance.

- **Engage key stakeholders in decision-making.** Representatives from the state associations representing school and district officials, teachers, disability advocates, and others contributed to the development of consensus recommendations for promoting enhanced P.E. and improving the K-12 learning standards that are meaningful to all.

- **Adopt or adapt interventions accordingly.** Successful implementation of evidence-based strategies can be achieved through many avenues. It is important to implement them in the context and reality of the state and local communities.