



Shape Up SF Coalition

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*Creating environments that
make it fun and easy to eat
well and move more for
people who live, work and
play in San Francisco.*

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New Study Says: Not Enough Physical Education in Elementary Schools

San Francisco Unified School District Finding Ways to Increase Activity

SAN FRANCISCO, CA – A new study and related recommendations on the status of physical education (PE) in San Francisco Unified School District elementary schools will be released by the Shape Up San Francisco PE Advocates on Thursday, February 23, 2012 at Chinese Immersion School at DeAvila, 1351 Haight St., at 1 p.m. The study reveals that while middle and high public school students are meeting state mandates for PE, most elementary students are not receiving adequate PE. PE provides an opportunity for all students to not only participate in health-enhancing physical activity, but to learn the skills and strategies necessary to be physically active throughout life. In elementary schools, when PE is provided by district PE specialists, students spend more time in skill development than when PE is taught by classroom teachers.

UCSF researchers, led by Kristine Madsen, MD, MPH, Assistant Professor in the Department of Pediatrics, visited 20 elementary schools, four middle schools, and four high schools in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). The researchers observed 5th, 7th, and 9th grade PE classes on three separate days at the study schools. Additionally, students were surveyed as to their opinions on PE and researchers interviewed teachers teaching PE, principals, and PTA leaders. The PE Assessment was funded by the California Obesity Prevention Project. “Lack of physical activity may be a far greater public health problem than obesity,” said Dr. Madsen, “and PE is a critical public health tool to increase physical activity for all youth.”

California education policy mandates 200 minutes of PE every 10 days for elementary students and 400 minutes every 10 days for middle and high school students. While all eight of the middle and high schools in this study met this mandate, only four of the 20 elementary schools studied (20%) are compliant. During PE, 5th grade students are spending, on average, 46% of class time in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA), which nearly meets the national recommendation of being active for at least half of PE. But because class is not regularly occurring, 5th grade students are getting an average of only 36 minutes of MVPA every *five days* from PE. Doctors recommend that children get 60 minutes of MVPA *every day*.

When asked what could be done to improve PE, the most frequent response from elementary school teachers and principals was to hire a full time PE teacher.

In response to the study, SFUSD administrators are working together with the PE Advocates and school principals to identify approaches that will support increased PE in elementary schools. Additionally, four new PE Specialists will be hired with Public Education Enrichment Funds (PEEF) to provide training, consultation and PE support to eight schools in 2012/2013 school year.

In 2009, SFUSD adopted a PE Master Plan, and has been implementing it with funds provided through the PEEF. “Our elementary school teachers, like teachers across the state, struggle to find the time to offer quality instruction in all of the subject areas a child needs to learn given limited time and resources and PE is no exception. Still, we know how important PE is and with our community partners, we look forward to finding creative ways to ensure that children at all schools benefit from quality PE,” said Carlos A. Garcia, Superintendent, SFUSD.

Study after study shows that exercise prepares the brain to learn, improves mood and attention, lowers stress and anxiety, improves behavior, and much more. The PE Advocates’ recommendations include increasing awareness about the benefits of PE, increasing the amount of PE to meet state mandate minutes for PE and implementing accountability measures to ensure public school children benefit from the effects of quality PE.

“We know that children in lower income schools have the most to gain from quality PE, as lower income children often have barriers to physical activity after school.” remarked Barbara Garcia, Director of Health, San Francisco Department of Public Health. “PE can help provide needed physical activity, and it is also a tool to address the achievement gap. Studies show that taking time away from academics for PE does not harm academic achievement.”

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Shape Up SF is a multidisciplinary initiative that focuses on preventing chronic disease by making it easy to eat healthy and move more. Shape Up SF, staffed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health, works to make systems level change that creates equitable access to healthy eating and active living for all. The PE Advocates, a project of Shape Up SF, includes representatives from the SFUSD PE department, University of California San Francisco, San Francisco State University, Sports Basement, District PTA, as well as parents. The PE Advocates goal is for all SFUSD students to get daily, quality PE from a credentialed PE Specialist.