

## **MAKING THE GRADE: REVERSING CHILDHOOD OBESITY IN SCHOOLS TOOLKIT**

### What is it?

In order to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic in the United States, it is critical to elevate the importance of physical education and physical activity as core components of a comprehensive curriculum in schools. It is also essential to explicitly state ways in which the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) will work to address physical education, physical activity, and health in general in elementary and secondary education. Although federally mandated curricula is forbidden, the reauthorization of ESEA can highlight the importance of physical education and physical activity throughout the school day to encourage states and school districts to broaden their curriculum beyond the traditional academic subject areas.

This toolkit provides information to help improve opportunities for physical activity in school environments – during school hours as well as before and after school. It will provide tools and resources to help ensure that school environments promote active living among children, and offer promising solutions to challenges that schools face in providing opportunities for physical activity.

### Background

ESEA is a United States federal statute enacted on April 11, 1965, for the purpose of ensuring equal access to education for all American children and establishing high standards and accountability. The act was explicitly established to address the needs of students from low-income communities in order to guarantee access to the resources necessary to attain high academic achievement. The funds from the act are approved for professional development, instructional materials, and resources to support educational programs and promotion of parental involvement. The act was originally authorized through 1970; however, the government has reauthorized it every five years since its enactment. The most recent reauthorization of ESEA is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

On March 13, 2010, the Obama administration released its blueprint for revising ESEA. The blueprint focuses on turning around the lowest performing schools and provides incentives for states to adopt academic standards that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace, and create accountability systems that measure progress toward meeting the goal that all children graduate and succeed in college. In addition, the administration's blueprint highlights Promise Neighborhoods as a model that states and school districts across the country can adopt in their efforts to ensure that all children have equal access to the resources needed to attain high academic achievement. The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) has released its federal application for Promise Neighborhoods—a new program investing in the future of children from birth through college by building a pipeline of social,



educational, and health supports in poor communities in urban, suburban, and rural areas across America.

#### Role of Federal, State, and Local Education Policy

Most education policy and regulations are determined at the state and local levels, especially those dealing with physical activity during the school day such as physical education standards, body mass index (BMI) assessment, and recess. One of the sections in the Obama administration's blueprint for revising ESEA is 'Successful, Safe, and Healthy Students' (SSHS). This section supports efforts to improve school climate by improving school safety and promoting students' physical and mental health. Currently, rather than applying for multiple discretionary grants, states and districts can apply for one funding program and target resources based on local needs. The DOE's proposal for the reauthorization of ESEA includes \$410 million for the SSHS program, under which states and districts would assess families' experiences with, and attitudes on, school engagement, school safety, and the overall school environment. This school-level information would be made publicly available and would help direct funds according to specified local needs.

Under ESEA, the DOE has authority for the Carol M. White Physical Education Program (PEP) grants – currently the only federal funds dedicated to physical education. The intent of this program is to help students meet their state standards for physical education; and it is geared toward local education agencies and community-based organizations. The DOE will continue to make grants in FY2010 under the Carol M. White Physical Education Program authority, but the future of this funding stream is uncertain.

Under the administration's blueprint, the section titled 'A Complete Education' presents a proposal to help more students in high-need schools receive a well-rounded education. The administration is proposing a competitive grants program for states, high-need districts, and nonprofit partners to strengthen the teaching and learning of arts, foreign languages, history and civics, financial literacy, environmental education, and other subjects. According to the U.S. Department of Education, grants may support, "either the development of new, promising instructional practices or the expansion of instructional practices for which there is evidence of improving student performance in one or more of these subjects"<sup>1</sup>. Funding for physical education is appropriate under these criteria, as research shows that engaging in daily physical activity is important for children's health and has a positive impact on students' academic performance. However, failing to provide a dedicated funding stream for physical education puts these programs at risk of being further diminished from the school day as they compete with other "non-core" courses for vital resources.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Dept. of Education, *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, 2009.