



American Heart Association | American Stroke Association

*Learn and Live*

**Tina Zuk, Government Relations Director  
American Heart Association  
Testimony on proposed rule re: state education standards**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed revisions to Vermont's Education Quality Standards. The American Heart Association respectfully asks the committee to further revise the education standards to improve the requirements concerning physical education, physical activity and nutrition in schools.

I am also speaking today as a board member for both the statewide Live Healthy Vermont chronic disease and obesity coalition and the Eat Well Play More Vermont childhood obesity coalition. These coalitions represent more than 30 Vermont organizations ranging from hospitals and insurers to business and educational leaders and public health.

While we appreciate the time put into the revisions by the State Board of Education, we would ask LCAR to consider that our organizations have also spent the past year meeting with a diverse group of Vermont organizations, and researching the best possible choices to address childhood obesity in Vermont. It's no coincidence that addressing physical activity and nutrition in schools was a top priority for the AHA, ACS and both obesity coalitions.

- We are extremely concerned about the significant increase in obesity in recent years and feel schools must be part of a comprehensive solution.
- Obesity is a pervasive problem that's growing even in a "healthy" state like Vermont. Over 58% of VT adults and 29% of our kids are overweight or obese.
- Eating well and being active at school are critical in addressing childhood obesity, especially given that students spend more than half of their day at school.
- Kids' behavior during their school years serves as a model for their behavior as adults. And according to the recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Vermont kids are getting less and less physical activity and more screen time.

**High School:**

- 13% of students were obese, up from 11% in 2011 and 9% in 2001.
- 16% of students were overweight, a significant increase from 14% in 2011
- Only 1/4 participated in at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day
- Only 40% of students attended at least one physical activity class in a week
- Less than ¼ ate the recommended amount of fruits and veggies
- Of Vermont's obese students, 18% attempted suicide in the past year and 15% reported being bullied in the last 30 days.

**Middle School:**

- Only 13% of students participated in physical education class every day -- a significant drop from 15% in 2011

- 29% of students played video or computer games or used a computer for something other than school work three or more hours/day – up from 26% in 2011
  - The number of students who were physically active for the recommended 60 minutes a day dropped from 31% to 29%.
- We appreciate that the proposed rule includes physical activity in schools for the first time. But given the news that kids are doing worse when it comes to physical activity and nutrition, we feel this necessitates a bigger change than what is currently included in the proposed rule.
  - **Additionally, our organizations' members have submitted comments and testified during the rulemaking process, and a good portion of our recommendations were included in the working draft of the proposed rule up until early December.**
  - **These were taken out prior to the adoption of the rule by the board at its December 17<sup>th</sup> meeting.**
  - **Please see the hand-out comparing the physical activity and nutrition section in the two versions.**
  - We haven't received much information about why this was the case other than that a lot of the changes to the standards were designed to offer schools flexible pathways in meeting students' educational needs – moving away from specific “seat time” for a subject in order to find out what might work best for the child.
  - We're actually asking for more “get-off-your-seat-time.” Unless kids receive this, we will continue to see increases in obesity. More “time” is exactly what Vermont kids need. Many are being hurried through lunch and get little physical activity.
  - We know that increased physical education, activity and better nutrition helps kids learn better.
  - There is mounting evidence connecting physical activity, cardiovascular fitness and cognitive function during childhood and adolescence, suggesting these factors are linked to academic achievement. They're all strong indicators that physical activity can be incorporated anywhere and anytime at school with positive academic results.<sup>i</sup>
  - Studies show active kids:
    - Think faster
    - Have better recall
    - Perform better

The American Heart Association recommends daily, quality physical education in our schools, together with other healthy lifestyle choices. The AHA's guidelines recommend schools provide 30 minutes each day of PE to elementary students and 45 minutes of PE a day for middle and high school day.

We realize there are competing demands for students' time but suggest that the following recommendation of the Eat Well Play More and Live Healthy Vermont coalitions for physical education and activity in schools be the *minimum* considered and serve as a good compromise:

- Offer physical education all 4 years for high school and do not decrease it to 1 ½ years as proposed.
- Provide physical education classes at least two days a week as included in the proposed rule but also require a minimum time.
  - For grades K-2 PE class time shall be no less than 30 minutes
  - For grades 3-12 class time shall be no less than 40 minutes
- Strengthen the proposed revision concerning physical activity to read, "Each school **shall** ensure that students in k-12 engage in at least 30 minutes of physical activity each day.
- The American Heart Association also encourages the board to:
  - Prohibit complete *exemptions* from Physical Education for any student. In cases where the general physical education course cannot meet the needs of a student with a cognitive or physical disability, the student should participate in adapted physical education classes provided by the school.
  - Eliminate substitutions for physical education. If this can't be achieved, then as proposed by the obesity coalitions, substitutions for Physical Education should only be allowed in High Schools (grades 9-12) and only if approved by and overseen by a PE teacher under the conditions detailed in the Vermont Department of Education Position Statement: Alternative Acquisition of Physical Education Credit, March 2012.

We feel it's also important to include nutrition standards in the education standards:

- As noted earlier, the previous draft of the standards included a recommendation supported by our coalitions:
  - Schools shall provide students with no less than 10 minutes to eat breakfast and no less than 20 minutes to eat lunch. Schools should provide students with access to clean drinking water throughout the day.

We hope you will take a serious look at these recommendations and note when you do that your decision will impact not only how kids are taught but also how they will live.

- Of all U.S. deaths from major chronic diseases, 23% are linked to sedentary lifestyles.
- Children's physical activity level drops dramatically between the ages of 9 and 15.
- This generation of kids is the first that will likely have shorter life spans than their parents

We have the ability to change these but we need your help. Thank you for your time.

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<sup>i</sup> Action for Healthy Kids, 2013, *The Learning Connection: What You Need to Know to Ensure Your Kids Are Healthy and Ready to Learn*