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American Heart Association
Testimony to Senate Education
School physical education and nutrition recommendations

The AHA urges the committee to consider including language in the Miscellaneous Education Bill to improve physical education, physical activity and nutrition in schools.

I am also speaking today as a board member for:

- Live Healthy Vermont chronic disease and obesity coalition
- Eat Well Play More Vermont childhood obesity coalition.
- These represent more than 30 Vermont organizations ranging from hospitals and insurers to business and educational leaders and public health. (see handout)

During a recent rulemaking process, we worked to include recommendations on these issues in the education quality standards. But, most were not included despite the fact that several recommendations were in the working draft of the rule up until its final approval.

We hope you will take a serious look at our 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

Our obesity coalitions met with a diverse group of Vermont organizations over the past year 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 all.

- 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.

- 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 final rule includes physical activity in schools for the first time. But given that kids are doing worse when it comes to physical activity and nutrition, we feel this necessitates a bigger change.

- **I have included a handout showing our recommendations that were included in the working draft of the proposed rule but were taken out just prior to its adoption.**

- Not only were these recommended by us, they <u>were also included in the recommendations submitted to the board by the Vermont Department of Health and the Agency of Education</u> and are consistent with the National Association of State Boards of Education School Health Policy Guide.

  We feel the significance of these recommendations was not considered in the board's decision, especially given that kids spend more than half of their day at school.

- In fact, at the Vermont Public Health Association's annual breakfast, Health Commissioner Chen said the school quality standards were really key in addressing childhood obesity and noted that the state board could do more with "a swipe of its pen" than he could.

- Our organizations brought this issue before LCAR and the committee was incredibly supportive, even asking the State Board to sit down with us and determine if we could agree on compromise language concerning PE and nutrition.

- However, the Board and AOE did <u>not</u> meet with us, and LCAR felt its hands were tied due to their directive against making policy decisions. We are, therefore, asking this committee to take action to begin to address the growing problem of childhood obesity.

- There is mounting evidence connecting physical activity, cardiovascular fitness and cognitive function during childhood and adolescence, suggesting these factors are linked to academic achievement.[i]

- A review of 44 studies of school-aged children demonstrated that when educators introduce physical activity lessons to the classroom, students' overall performance on standardized tests improved.[ii]

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.

- Provide physical education classes at least two days a week 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 revision on 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.

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 have the ability to make these positive changes but need your help. Doing so will also begin to decrease the $180 million Vermont spends annually on health care spending related to obesity.

We also appreciate this committee's past support of legislation allowing greater liability protection to Vermont schools to encourage greater use of their facilities by the public for recreational purposes. Though this legislation has stalled in the Senate and House, we hope we can count on your strong support to advance the measure in the future.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to comment.

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[i] *Action for Healthy Kids, 2013, The Learning Connection: What You Need to Know to Ensure Your Kids Are Healthy and Ready to Learn*

[ii] *January 2011, Preventive Medicine*;