

Movement Matters: Promoting Health and Well-Being Afterschool

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Where Did All the Activity Go?

When left to their own devices most children and youth do not get enough exercise. This belief was implicit by requiring students to take physical education courses in public schools as early as the 1800's. Unfortunately by the end of the 20th century schools had begun to struggle considerably in meeting this obligation. Increasing demands to have more classroom time for students compounded by decreasing federal, state and local support for physical education activities have regulated ongoing physical activity to the sidelines.

In 1996 the Massachusetts Board of Education repealed regulations that had mandated the minimum annual hours of instruction for physical education. As a result, participation dropped from 80% to less than 60% in a decade. During that time the number of students who were either overweight or at risk of being overweight rose significantly and now stands at more than 1 in 4. Despite current Massachusetts law mandating that "physical education shall be taught as a required subject in all grades for all students" (MGL Chapter 71, Section 3), according to the 2005 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, more than one third of high school students attended physical education classes less than one day per week and over half of seniors did not participate at all.

Today, the average child spends almost as much time in front of the television, playing video games, listening to music or using a computer as is spent in the classroom—almost 5.5 hours each day. More than 3 in 5 children ages 9-13 do not participate in any organized physical activity outside of school hours, and 1 in 5 do not engage in any at all.¹ Severely overweight children also miss more school due to weight-related illnesses—an average of one day per month—exacting physical, educational, and economic costs both inside and outside the classroom. Clearly, our schools cannot carry the burden alone of making sure children and youth get the physical exercise they need to be healthy and productive.

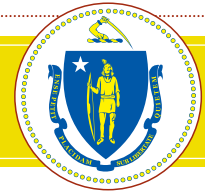
Perhaps more troubling—the trends towards obesity and inactivity have surprisingly deep roots—16% of Massachusetts children between the ages of 2 and 5 who participate in the Women Infants and Children (WIC) program are overweight.² If a girl does not participate in sports by the time she is 10, there is only a 10 percent chance she will participate when she is 25.³ And while various public health agencies and the Center for Disease Control have made the obesity crisis one of its chief concerns, the primary strategies and funding priorities used to fight this "battle of the bulge" have almost completely excluded youth sports and physical education programming.

"Sedentary lifestyles cause serious health problems, lower self-esteem, lead to social and psychological problems and contribute to poor academic performance. If this pattern continues into adulthood, <as it does for the vast majority of young people>, it will lead to an unprecedented

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rate of premature death and disability, diminished workplace productivity and serious financial repercussions for families, insurers, healthcare providers and our society.”⁴

The effects of such inactivity in Massachusetts are telling:

- Public school trends continue to move towards decreasing time for physical activity, recess and lunch in an effort to meet the new Student Learning Time Regulations.⁵
- After school programs are under similar pressure to forgo sports in favor of more “serious” developmental supports like tutoring and homework help.
- A higher percentage of high school students describe themselves as overweight (31%) and a larger number report they are trying to lose weight (46%) compared with the national average.
- Overweight and obesity cost Massachusetts an estimated \$1.8 billion in 2003.
- Unless the numbers decrease, obesity and overweight will soon pass smoking as the number one cause of death in the state.⁶

The Potential and Power of Recreation, Physical Activity and Sports After School

In spite of these alarming trends, a wealth of unrealized opportunity exists. Due to the decline in physical education in schools and countless hours spent in front of the TV, after-school sports and recreation are the only opportunity many children and youth have for regular physical activity.

More than 38 million American youth participate in organized sports. After-school and summer programs offer thousands of additional opportunities to promote physical activity through clubs, classes, and recreational pursuits like outdoor education and community service programs. Youth sports and recreation also attract far more adult volunteers than most other types of programs—there are at least 2.5 million volunteer coaches in the U.S. alone.⁷

After school physical activities are ideal for developing the kinds of assets that help young people thrive in adolescence, and for giving them a “practice field” in a supervised setting for their roles as professionals and citizens in adulthood by:

- Developing powerful networks of social relationships with peers and caring adults;
- Offering the near-term prospect of healthier minds and bodies by promoting academic success, appreciation of health and fitness, and the values of fair play, integrity and commitment;
- Affording cumulative benefits associated with lifelong physical activity by reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, promoting healthy weight, and building healthy bones, muscles and joints; and by
- Providing a gateway into the world of work, select professional and social networks, civic engagement, higher-education and scholarships, and even fame and fortune.

Unfortunately the dominant delivery vehicle for after school youth sports in this country—volunteer run and managed community programs—rarely have the capacity and support needed to realize this potential and deliver on the promise of child/youth development and physical health. The vast majority of youth coaches, most estimates say as high as 90%, have no formal

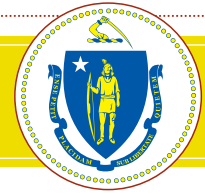
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Resource:

[Boston Youth Sports Initiative Website](#)

This website includes hundreds of pages and links relevant for Massachusetts programs, from key research and a funding database to resources for program development and volunteer support. Listings for youth sport jobs, events and trainings are updated weekly and can be sent electronically through periodic e-blasts and a monthly newsletter.



education in coaching techniques, first aid, injury prevention, or emergency care.⁸ Many operate as lone wolves without support networks, resources or oversight. For those that are part of larger leagues, the dedicated administrators running them do so with shoestring budgets while juggling full-time jobs and families.

Sports and recreation programs also have difficulty finding the funding and resources needed to purchase safety equipment, find adequate transportation, or maintain facilities. The organizational structure of community sports leagues also mirrors the wider world of competitive and professional sports, magnifying the existing barriers for girls and women, urban youth, people of color and those with disabilities.

Expanding the Playing Field: The Positive Impact of Physical Activity

A strong national consensus is emerging around the role out of school time can play in supporting the healthy development of children and youth. The Secretaries of Education and Health and Human Services, Former U.S. Surgeons General C. Everett Koop and David Satcher, The American Academy of Pediatrics, The National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity, and The National Association of Elementary School Principals all have recommended physical activity during after school hours as part of their plans.⁹ After school programs are also playing an increasing role in combating obesity by supporting schools to meet national requirements of the 2006 School Wellness Policy. For example, The Boston Public Schools Wellness Policy encourages schools to meet physical education and wellness requirements through after school programming.¹⁰

The evidence from research is just as clear—supporting after school sports and recreation is an investment in lifelong health for young people and communities that provides long last benefits such as:

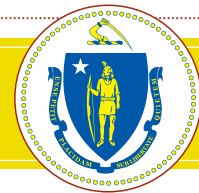
- Children and youth who are involved in physical activities fare better in school, have higher social skills, are more team oriented, are healthier as determined by fitness standards and are more active participants in making their communities a better place.¹¹
- Massachusetts students who are achieving academically are more likely to get regular vigorous exercise, be enrolled in a physical education class, and have a healthy weigh.¹²
- More than four out of five executive businesswomen played sports growing up—and the vast majority say lessons learned on the playing field have contributed to their success in business.¹³
- Sports and physical recreation participation shapes civic behavior later in life (i.e. in one study children who played on sports teams were almost twice as likely to volunteer as an adult).¹⁴
- For every \$1.00 invested in physical activity, \$3.20 in medical expenses can be saved.¹⁵

Simply stated, the power of physical activity, recreation and sport is unquestionable, the enjoyment of these activities are timeless and the potential to transform children and youth through this physical health medium during out of school time is vast. Fully realized, the positive intentional practice of sport and recreation-based learning and development can do nothing short of developing a generation of solid, decent, well-rounded young people who will one day in the not too distant future become the future workers and citizens who will ensure that Massachusetts and the nation continue to prosper in the 21st century.

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Promising Practice:
Shape Up Somerville is a community-based project focused on improving physical activity and healthy eating options for public school children in grades 1-3 that has been successful in reducing weight gain in children at risk for obesity. The after school nutrition and physical activity curriculum, HEAT (Healthy Eating, Active Time), has been implemented in more than 120 programs throughout the country. To learn more: [Shape Up Somerville Project.](#)



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ISSUE BRIEF

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Related Resources

- ¹ <http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/freepubs/pdfs/ui349.pdf>
- ² Massachusetts Public Health Web 2002 http://www.mphaweb.org/resources/health_children_jan_02.pdf
- ³ Linda Bunker, University of Virginia, 1989
- ⁴ Thomson Medstat, Childhood Obesity: Costs, Treatment Patterns, Co-morbidities, Disparities in Care, 2006
- ⁵ Massachusetts Public Health Web 2002 http://www.mphaweb.org/resources/health_children_jan_02.pdf
- ⁶ State of Massachusetts Office of Health and Human Services, State Outlook, www.mass.gov, 08.22.07
- ⁷ Team Up for Youth, Youth Sports Promote youth and Community Health, 2004
- ⁸ Seefeldt, 1992.
- ⁹ Daniel Perkins, Parents: Making Youth Sports a Positive Experience, Pennsylvania State University, 2000
- ¹⁰ <http://boston.k12.ma.us/dept/NEWdocs/FNS-5.pdf>
- ¹¹ Daniel Perkins, Parents: Making Youth Sports a Positive Experience, Pennsylvania State University, 2000
- ¹² <http://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/hprograms/yrbs>
- ¹³ Game Face: A Survey on Sports in the Lives of Women Business Executives, Feb. 2002
- ¹⁴ Sherri Torjman, Culture and Recreation: Links to Well Being, Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 2004
- ¹⁵ World Health Day 2002 Information- CDC, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

About the Author

Beth Beard is an independent consultant with 15 years of experience in nonprofit management, large-scale capacity building, organizational development, research, and evaluation. Beth is currently working with a variety of local and national nonprofits on capacity building in community development, organizational change, public/private partnerships, and communities of practice design. She holds an M.Ed. in Counseling Psychology, Marriage and Family Therapy and a B.A. in Philosophy and Psychology from the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

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