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The American Heart Association recommends that schools lead the way to ensure that all children and youth participate in adequate physical activity during the [school](#) day.

"Children and youth spend a substantial number of their waking hours in school, so it's important that schools provide adequate physical activity" said Russell R. Pate, Ph.D., chairman of the writing group and a professor of exercise science at the [University of South Carolina](#) in Columbia, S.C.

"Although schools are under increasing pressure to increase student scores on standardized tests, the recent dramatic rise in the prevalence of obesity in children and adolescents in the United States suggests that there is a pressing need for the nation's schools to systematically and effectively promote behaviors that will prevent the development of overweight," the authors wrote.

During the past 20 years obesity rates in U.S. children and youth have increased markedly, the writing group said. Today, among children ages 6-11 years old, 15.8 percent are overweight and 31.2 percent are overweight or at risk for overweight.

Among adolescents ages 12-19 years old, 16.1 percent are overweight and 30.9 percent are overweight or at risk for overweight.

While most states require that students receive minimal amounts of [physical education](#) (PE), and daily physical education is recommended by many entities, the rapid increase in the prevalence of obesity in young people has occurred at the same time as other alarming trends.

Between 1991 and 2003 the percentage of [high school](#) students enrolled in daily physical education decreased from 41.6 percent to 28.4 percent.

Physically active transport to and from school has declined from previous generations. Today only one-third of students who live within one mile of school walk or bike there; and less than 3 percent of students living within two miles of school walk or bike there.

In addition, the statement notes that only 8 percent of elementary schools, 6.4 percent of middle/junior high schools, and 5.8 percent of senior high schools provided daily physical education or allocated the recommended amount of time per week (150 minutes for elementary and 225 minutes for junior and senior high schools), according to a year 2000 study.

"It's important that kids adopt active lifestyles," Pate said. "The list of negative health outcomes associated with physical inactivity -- including heart disease and [type 2 diabetes](#) -- is growing."

The scientific statement takes a comprehensive look at the state of physical education, from the amount of time students should be active each week to enhancements in the [college education](#) of PE teachers.

"It doesn't mean backing down on academics -- it's not an either/or thing. A balanced academic program should include PE and should also incorporate strategies to increase physical activity throughout the school day," Pate said. "Physical activity shouldn't stop at PE class."

Some of the policy and practice recommendations are:

1. Schools should ensure that all children and youth participate in a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity during the school day, plus the option of extra-curricular and school-linked community programs.
2. Schools should deliver evidence-based [health](#)-related PE programs that meet national standards to students at all school levels. These programs should include moderate-to-vigorous physical activity for at least 50 percent of class time, as well as teach students the motor and behavioral skills needed to engage in life-long physical activity.
3. States should hold schools accountable for delivering PE programs that meet national standards for quality and quantity (i.e., age-appropriate amounts of time per week spent active during class). Each state should include physical education in its core curriculum and instructional quality.

The American Heart Association is lobbying in every state to require that quality, daily PE be offered in all grades, that schools adhere to national PE standards for elementary and middle school students and that PE be required for high school graduation.

The scientific statement "Promoting Physical Activity in Children and Youth: A Leadership Role for Schools" is published in *Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association*.