

Why GAO Did This Study

Physical activity is a crucial part of preventing or reducing childhood obesity, and may also yield important academic and social benefits. However, many children do not attain the level of daily physical activity recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Schools are uniquely positioned to provide students opportunities to increase physical activity through physical education (PE) classes and involvement in sports teams. In view of the federal government's role in promoting the health and welfare of children, the Congress is currently considering a number of proposals aimed in part at increasing the physical activity of youth. To assist the Congress as it considers options for increasing physical activity among students, GAO was asked to review (1) the status of opportunities for elementary and secondary school students to participate in school-based physical education or sports activities; and (2) what challenges schools face in providing physical education and sports opportunities. To conduct this study, GAO reviewed federal survey data; interviewed state, district, and school officials in selected states, as well as federal officials and others with relevant expertise; reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations; and reviewed studies on the benefits of physical education and sports for students.

GAO makes no recommendations in this report. The Departments of Education and Health and Human Services provided technical comments, which were incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-12-350](#). For more information, contact Linda Calbom at (206) 287-4809 or calboml@gao.gov.

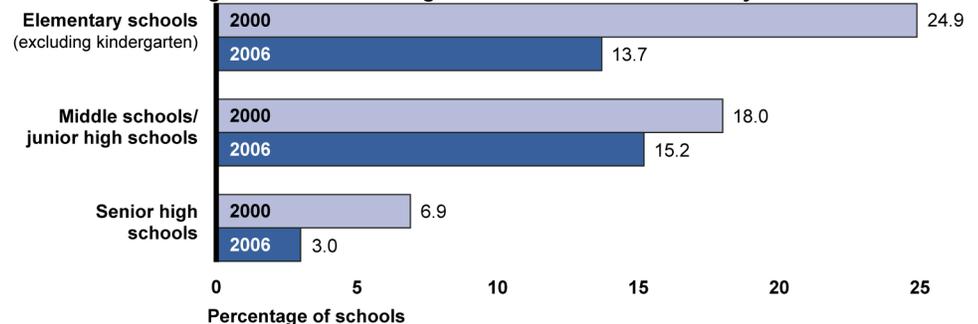
K-12 EDUCATION

School-Based Physical Education and Sports Programs

What GAO Found

While the most recent national data show instruction time for PE decreased from 2000 to 2006, officials GAO interviewed stated that school sports opportunities have generally increased in recent years. Specifically, the percentage of schools that offered PE at least 3 days a week decreased from 2000 to 2006, but the percentage of schools that required students in each grade to take some PE increased during the same period. For example, the estimated percentage of schools that required PE in ninth grade increased from 13 percent in 2000 to 55 percent in 2006. Moreover, states, districts, and schools appear to have increased emphasis on the quality of PE programs, such as helping students develop lifelong fitness skills, according to national data and GAO interviews. Data on high school students show that participation in PE varies by grade level but not by gender or across racial groups. In addition, most state, district, and school officials GAO interviewed said opportunities to participate in interscholastic sports have increased, particularly for girls, and that many schools have responded to increased demand by adding new sports teams over the last few years.

Estimated Percentage of Schools Offering PE in All Grades at Least 3 Days a Week



Source: School Health Policies and Programs Study 2006 data.

Schools GAO visited cited several challenges to providing PE and sports opportunities but have found ways to alleviate some of the challenges associated with sports. In particular, school officials said that budget cuts and inadequate facilities have affected their ability to provide PE opportunities. For example, officials from one school district GAO visited reported reducing PE instruction time because of limited funding for instructors. Other schools, such as one where the gym doubled as the cafeteria, lack dedicated space to use for PE. In addition, school officials reported challenges in providing sports opportunities, as issues related to transportation, facilities, and staffing have been compounded by budgetary constraints. For example, officials from some schools said funding to transport students to outside facilities for practices or games was limited. Other school officials cited difficulty in attracting quality coaches because of low pay and the large amount of time involved. Even so, some schools have mitigated some challenges related to sports by relying heavily on outside funding sources such as booster clubs and gate receipts and leveraging community facilities. Additionally, some schools charge student fees for sports activities, which may be a barrier for lower-income students. However, many schools waive such fees.