



Improving Student Health Through Physical Fitness in California Schools

Da'Shay Templeton, California Lutheran University

California's youth are facing a health crisis. Childhood obesity rates are climbing, and students from underprivileged backgrounds experience the most severe impacts. The state's physical fitness data reveals alarming disparities—schools with predominantly low-income and racially marginalized students report the lowest fitness levels. Meanwhile, students who engage in consistent physical education (PE) demonstrate better academic performance, improved mental health, and a lower risk of chronic diseases later in life. Investing in equitable, well-funded physical fitness programs is not just a health initiative—it's an educational and economic imperative.

The Current State of Physical Fitness in Schools

Many California schools struggle to provide structured, high-quality physical education (PE) programs, a challenge that has worsened despite rising concerns about childhood obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and overall child well-being. Schools serving economically disadvantaged students typically have fewer resources for physical activity, increasing existing health disparities and educational inequities. The decline in PE programs can be attributed primarily to budget cuts and the prioritization of standardized test scores in core subjects.

Due to the absence of federal and state mandates and limited funding, many schools lack incentives to maintain or expand their physical fitness programs. Consequently, disparities become more pronounced, especially among Latin*, American Indian, Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander students, who consistently report the lowest fitness scores in California. These demographic groups often attend schools in districts characterized by high rates of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, English language learners, migrants, foster children, and homeless youth.

Existing research also highlights that economically disadvantaged students typically face barriers such as limited access to nutritious food, fewer extracurricular physical activities, and reduced participation in school sports due to financial constraints. Addressing these inequities is crucial, as the lack of structured physical fitness opportunities not only impacts immediate health outcomes but also contributes to long-term health risks and educational disparities among vulnerable student populations.

The Economic and Educational Benefits of Physical Fitness

Investing in physical education programs yields significant benefits for students, schools, and society. The U.S. spends approximately **\$117 billion annually** on health care due to physical inactivity, a substantial cost that could be significantly reduced through effective PE programs targeting youth.

Physical fitness among youth is closely linked to academic success. According to research by the CDC, students who engage in regular physical activity not only achieve higher academic scores, particularly in subjects such as math and reading but also demonstrate improved concentration and classroom behavior. A report from [Active Living Research](#) found that physically active students scored, on average, 20% higher on standardized tests compared to their less active peers.

Regular participation in physical education also promotes mental health, reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression in youth. The [American Psychological Association](#) highlights that physically active students report lower rates of mental health issues and higher levels of emotional resilience. Schools that prioritize enhanced PE programs also experience reduced absenteeism rates. According to [the Society of Health and Physical Educators \(SHAPE America\)](#), effective PE programs lead to up to a 28% decrease in school absenteeism, creating more consistent and productive learning environments.

In addition to personal health and [academic improvements](#), physical education fosters essential social skills such as teamwork, leadership, and discipline. These competencies not only benefit students during their schooling years but also translate into lifelong skills that enhance community engagement and professional opportunities. Therefore, investing in high-quality physical education not only supports healthier, more academically successful youth but also strengthens schools, supports families, and builds more resilient communities.

Policy Recommendations

To improve student health, academic outcomes, and long-term well-being, policymakers must take steps to strengthen physical education in schools:

1. Mandate and Fund Comprehensive Physical Fitness Programs

- Require **daily** PE for all K-12 students, ensuring that programs are adequately funded.
- Increase state and federal investment in PE, particularly in underfunded districts.
- Use models like [The California Local Control Funding Formula](#), which allocates resources based on student needs over local property wealth. LCFF provides additional funding to districts serving low-income students, English learners, and foster youth, ensuring that schools with greater challenges receive the support necessary to improve educational and health outcomes.

2. Expand and Standardize Fitness Data Collection

- Establish a **statewide dashboard** for physical fitness test results to track progress and identify disparities.
- Ensure that data is **publicly available and broken down by race, income, and English proficiency**.
- Follow the example of states like [Connecticut and Georgia](#), which provide transparent, actionable data.

3. Ensure Equitable Access to Extracurricular Physical Activities

- Create **free or low-cost** after-school sports programs for economically disadvantaged students.
- Provide funding for school districts to **build safe, accessible recreational spaces**.
- Encourage partnerships between schools and local [parks and community organizations](#).

California's policymakers have the power to reverse the decline of physical fitness in schools and ensure every child—regardless of zip code—has access to quality PE. The data is clear: **healthier students are better learners.**

Read the full research report here: [Exercising Educational Equity Using California's Physical Fitness Data](#)