



## Cutting physical education may be a shortsighted plan

How we set educational priorities is a reflection of our values and our vision of the future. Last week, a major change in Hawaii's educational priorities came to light.

A Hawaii state Department of Education committee plans to propose decreasing the high school physical education requirement from one year to one semester. The pressure behind this appears to be the desire to improve intellectual competitiveness and increase students' ability to achieve a successful and happy lifestyle

**Question:** Does this reflect vision or lack of vision?

**Answer:** Even though this proposal reflects a nationwide trend to cut non-academic requirements, our opinion is that such a change is shortsighted and lacks consideration for short-term and long-term physical and mental health. Similar trends to cut art and music share the same lack of vision.

**Q:** Is there any reason to think that prior generations were harmed intellectually by spending too much time on physical education during high school?

**A:** It is difficult to believe that the boomer generation would have been more successful given less opportunity for physical activity. However, it is clear that those who

did not develop active lifestyles have been more likely to become overweight and develop diabetes, osteoporosis or mental illness.

**Q:** How is the potential decline in physical fitness of high school students likely to affect them?

**A:** Hawaii already has a growing problem with overweight and obese children. Over a year ago, Professors Kwok Ho and Dennis Chai, from the Kinesiology and Leisure Science Department at the University of Hawaii, reported that the incidence of obesity in Hawaii's children is about twice mainland levels.

The long-term health of this generation is already a major concern. Eliminating opportunities for physical activity is like tossing gasoline on the fire.

**Q:** Isn't the way children eat a greater determinant of excess body fat than their level of physical activity?

**A:** No. Even though being overweight is a matter of excess calories in and inadequate calories out, it has been shown that many overweight children do not eat more than their lean peers. In fact, the key factor causing excess body fat is less overall movement and lack of exercise.

**Q:** What is the caloric value of

P.E. classes?

**A:** According to coach Les Parrilla at Roosevelt High School, students in P.E. classes spend about four hours per week in a variety of physical activities. The calories expended are likely about 2,000 per week. That's enough to prevent more than 8 pounds of fat gain per semester, or 15 to 20 pounds per school year!

Also, Parrilla points out that the trend today is to teach the skills needed for lifetime fitness and long-term health.

**Q:** How does a lack of physical activity affect the ability of students to focus in the classroom?

**A:** OK, who didn't have a hard time sitting still in the classroom? Regular exercise is known to enhance brain function (see "Health Options," May 15), support mental health and most likely help hyperactive teens sit and focus better on learning.

If packing academic essentials into tight schedules requires cutting back on physical education, then schools must find fun extracurricular opportunities for daily physical activity. Maybe popular dance music in the halls would help.

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