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U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee

Hearing on “ESEA Reauthorization: Supporting Student Health, Physical Education, and Well-being”

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Senator Harkin and members of the Committee, I am honored to have the opportunity to participate in today’s hearing, and I greatly appreciate the attention that you are focusing on the health and well-being of our nation’s youth.

My 25 years of experience in conducting research on physical activity in children and adolescents and my service on a number of national panels and federal advisory committees related to promotion of physical activity and prevention of childhood obesity have led me to four important conclusions:

1. To achieve and maintain good health our young people should engage in 60 or more minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day.
2. The vast majority of American children and youth do not meet that guideline; indeed most do not come close to meeting it.
3. If our students are to meet physical activity guidelines and accrue the associated health benefits, our schools must be deliver physical activity programs of the highest quality.
4. An essential step toward insuring that our schools effectively provide and promote physical activity in their students is to hold those schools accountable for providing physical education and other physical activity programs that meet best-practice standards.

Over the past several decades our society has changed in ways that have profoundly affected our physical activity behavior. We have drastically reduced the demand for physical activity by building work-saving innovations into almost every aspect our lives – elevators have replaced stairs, automobiles have replaced bicycles, and computers have replaced physical labor. At the same time our culture has become saturated with forms of entertainment that are sedentary and that tend to draw us away from physically active leisure pursuits. The net effect has been a marked decrease in our physical activity levels. And make no mistake about it, our children live in the same world we do – and it is one that demands very little physical activity, presents many barriers to physical activity, and is littered with sedentary distracters. Indeed, today’s children have never known a world like the one that many of us grew up in – one in which walking to school was the norm, moms pushed kids out the door after school with the directive to go out and play until dinner, and school physical education was a much more prominent component of the curriculum than it is in many schools today.

Reversing the downward trend in physical activity in our children and youth will require changes in many components of our society. Just two weeks ago I was here in Washington, DC with my colleague Dr. Yancey for the release of the first U.S. National Physical Activity Plan, private-public multi-organizational initiative calling for implementation of over two hundred policies and practices across eight societal

sectors. The Education Sector is prominently featured in the National Plan and it will be central in our efforts to increase physical activity in young people. In my view, it would not be fair or realistic to expect our schools to solve the entire youth physical activity problem that we confront. Clearly parents must play a central role, and community providers of youth services will be important too. However, I do believe it is both fair and indeed essential that our schools lead the way and do everything they reasonably can do to help us overcome this problem.

So what should our schools do? Both the Institute of Medicine and the American Heart Association have called for children and youth to receive at least one-half of the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity during the school day. Schools can insure that kids achieve this goal through multiple strategies. They include adoption of active transport initiatives like “safe routes to school,” daily provision of recess breaks, inclusion of physically active teaching-learning methods in classrooms, expansion and enrichment of extracurricular physical activity programs, and collaboration with community-based youth service providers in delivery of after-school physical activity programs. Most critically, all schools should meet prevailing national standards for the quality and quantity of physical education provided to students.

As we all know, in recent years our schools have come under heavy scrutiny with regard to their effectiveness in producing academic achievement. I believe that an unintended negative consequence has been a diversion of resources away from physical education. But if the goal is to enhance student academic achievement, there is mounting evidence that reducing a child’s physical activity may well negatively impact his or her academic achievement. I quote from the conclusion of a very recently released CDC report: “There is substantial evidence that physical activity can improve academic achievement (including grades and test scores). Increasing or maintaining time dedicated to physical education may help, and does not appear to adversely impact, academic performance.”

Finally, I am convinced that a step that we must take is creation of a system that holds the schools accountable for providing students with physical education and other physical activity programs that meet accepted national standards. The FIT Kids Act, which recently was passed by the House of Representatives, would help create such a system and, I believe, would be an enormous step forward. Accordingly, I strongly encourage you to support the FIT Kids Act. Thank you very much for having me here today.