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Testimony to the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee

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

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Senator Harkin and members of the Committee, thank you for this invitation. During the past five years, I have been pleased to serve on several Institute of Medicine Committees focused on childhood obesity prevention, and with Dr. Pate on the Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee and National Physical Activity Plan Coordinating Committee. Last month I was honored by my appointment to the Board of Directors of the Partnership for a Healthier America, to work with Honorary Chair First Lady Michelle Obama in her campaign to end the childhood obesity epidemic.

I have been engaged in research for the past 20 years on disparities in chronic disease risk and burden affecting socioeconomically marginalized communities, and in designing and testing feasible and effective interventions to achieve health equity. Physical activity and sedentary behavior are particularly important as targets for reducing health disparities and achieving health equity. Obesity and most diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes for which physical activity is beneficial are more prevalent in communities of color. Physical activity levels in these communities are generally lower than those in the population at large, and disparities may be increasing.

Obstacles to an active lifestyle are indeed more daunting in underserved communities. Neighborhoods in these communities have fewer recreational and fitness facilities, parks, private or community gardens, appealing vistas such as oceans or lakes, and pedestrian amenities like sidewalks and crosswalks. Proximity to activity-promoting resources is important, because people are more likely to use nearby resources. Many poor neighborhoods are, in fact, "activity deserts"--unsafe, dirty, and poorly lit and maintained. There is more stress-inducing noise, traffic congestion, and information overload from outdoor ads, including those promoting products associated with sedentary behaviors like films, TV shows, and autos. Few ads, such as for sporting equipment or fitness clubs, promote physical activity in any community—a scant 1% according to our recent study. Not coincidentally, substandard schools are the norm in these neighborhoods, with overcrowding, crumbling infrastructures, and fewer highly trained teachers, including PE specialists, resulting in lower levels of academic achievement and persistence.

Activity-focused physical education (PE) represents an effective, evidence-based method of improving physical activity and fitness. Increasing PE and recess duration and frequency have been primary policy targets for arresting youth obesity. Yet, research, state-level legislative policy changes and authoritative recommendations have not produced substantive improvements. Existing requirements in most states are poorly supported and enforced as a result of competing priorities for fiscal, scheduling and spatial resources, in part due to legislative pressure emphasizing standardized test scores

as the yardstick of school performance. For example, a California Department of Education PE audit found that fewer than half of school districts met the mandated elementary school PE requirement of 200 minutes per 10 days. UCLA, in collaboration with Samuels and Associates, studied a random sample of public school districts throughout the state. We found that the average percentage of time in PE that kids were at least moderately active was only 26%, ranging from 14% in low-resource schools scoring low on fitness tests to 40% in the high-fitness-scoring, higher resource schools. The proportion of active time in PE was positively associated with standardized test scores, in both higher and lower resource schools. Thus, ensuring that school PE is active could improve both academic performance and health.

There are promising ways of increasing physical activity in school and after-school settings to augment PE. In a recent University of Kansas study, for example, integrating brief activity-focused lessons into the academic curriculum not only increased elementary school children's physical activity, in and outside of school, but also improved academic performance across several content areas. Those intervention schools that added at least 75 minutes per week in active lessons significantly slowed the weight gain observed in the control schools. Institution of after-school program guidelines recommending certain types and amounts of physical activity are also emerging from state departments of education and health. I want to call to your attention bill AB 2705 in California that would require that PE and after-school programs be active.

I would like to highlight two promising projects in which I am involved in California to illustrate innovative approaches to school physical activity: Healthy Eating Active Communities (HEAC), and Instant Recess®. The California Endowment-funded HEAC initiative emphasizes practical interventions with low start-up and maintenance costs accessible to low-resource communities. School intervention strategies included lengthening PE periods, purchasing new equipment, upgrading facilities and training teachers to deliver active, enjoyable PE. Smaller class size, conducting PE outdoors vs. indoors, and activities involving the majority of participants in running and walking were generally associated with higher activity levels. These findings underscore the priority of quality improvement policies to promote physical activity during PE. PE is worthy of further policy attention because it is the only activity program that can benefit essentially all students, usually on a daily basis.

Instant Recess, a public-private partnership between UCLA, the state and county health department and professional sports, is an evidence-based approach to render prolonged sitting as socially unacceptable as smoking, or drinking and driving. The approach taps the many cultural assets available in communities of color such as collectivism, strong civic and religious institutions touching most community members, and the centrality of music, dance and sports traditions to culture expression. Instant Recess 10-minute activity breaks are simple, structured, low-impact and music-driven, with sports or ethnic dance-based moves, and disseminated by DVD or CD and photo guide for ease of use by lay audiences. Venues with captive audiences such as schools, youth programs, worksites, sports arenas are targeted to drive fitness-promoting cultural change. The approach has been adopted by the San Diego Padres, the Los Angeles Sparks, school districts and worksites throughout California, in Winston-Salem, NC and in Washington,

DC, the latter supported by daily Pacifica radio broadcasts of the breaks. We recently completed a systematic review of 40 studies, including several from our research team, documenting the effectiveness of brief activity breaks in increasing physical activity and improving organizational outcomes such as worker productivity and student academic performance.

Widespread societal change will be required to get America moving and arrest the growth of childhood obesity. In the course of my research, and my experience in the practice of medicine and heading a health department, I have identified several priorities that will be important in building the social norm change and political will for aggressive legislative change:

1. Focus on decision-makers governing high-exposure settings--one employer, politician, or school principal or board member can influence the social and cultural environments of hundred or thousands of people for years at a time.
2. Emphasize approaches tailored to the needs of sedentary population subgroups to reduce health disparities. Helping at-risk communities be more active should generate the greatest organizational and individual return on investment.
3. Rely less on individual motivation, supportive cultural values, or widespread access to active leisure opportunities. Telling individuals to “just do it” cannot work when many Americans live in activity deserts and PE and recess have been taken out of schools.

We have a great deal of evidence about how to make our schools and communities more activity-friendly for children and adults. With physical inactivity being the fourth leading cause of death and childhood obesity continuing to rise, all sectors of society need to take action to get Americans moving.

Thank you.