

Testimony of Lori Rose Benson

Director  
Of the Office of Fitness and Health

Before

The House Committee on Education and Labor

On

*The Benefits of Physical and Health Education for Our Nation's  
Children*

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Good morning Chairman Miller and members of the Committee on Education and Labor.

I am Lori Rose Benson, Director of the Office of Fitness and Health Education for the New York City Department of Education. From my experience in helping to meet the fitness and health challenges of New York City's 1.1 million students, I have three key messages that I hope inform your thinking and your work:

- *First, there is no magic formula for ending the national childhood obesity epidemic....but we must address this issue immediately, vigorously, and comprehensively.*
- *Second, schools can play an important role in improving student fitness levels, in a culture that includes family refrigerators stocked with high calorie foods... well-worn couches that sit opposite TVs...and lack of community opportunities and facilities for family fitness activities.*
- *Third, we must create and nurture a culture of fitness in schools that includes...but is never limited to...athletics and traditional sports with clear accountability standards tied to appropriate assessments.*

Last week my bosses, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein appeared before this committee to highlight the successes of New York City's Children First education reforms. The Children First reforms focus on closing our city's student achievement gap, as you heard, but they also tackle tough issues surrounding physical education and its relationship to student health and academic performance.

Under the Mayor and Chancellor's leadership we are making great strides toward providing quality fitness and health instruction for every student...male or female, able-bodied or physically challenged, sports

fanatics or couch potatoes. My office is helping schools provide students with the knowledge, skills, and increased opportunities for moderate to vigorous physical activity that are essential for fitness.

While there is no silver bullet, there are programs and strategies that can be part of the solution.

National health standards tell us that children need 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity everyday. I encourage schools to look not only at required physical education classes, but also at before and after school opportunities...and possibilities of physical activity in classrooms.

Movement in classrooms is an exciting development in school fitness. In New York City we have trained more than 1,200 teachers in 80 elementary schools using the Nike "Let Me Play" curriculum in classrooms. Regular classroom teachers are leading their students in fitness activities that complement, not supplant, teaching in core academic subjects. We're showing teachers that including activity in the regular classroom day gets students "ready to learn" and also teaches that lifelong fitness habits are essential for good health.

We also introduced the *Physical Best* curriculum, a program of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, for physical education classes. This is a health-related fitness education program for kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The emphasis is on empowering students to develop the knowledge and skills to take responsibility for their own personal fitness.... to discover which physical activities they like best and are most likely to do on their own.

We support that curriculum with hundreds of free year-round professional development opportunities for administrators and teachers. Creating school buy-in for fitness requires creating a culture of healthy fitness that goes beyond traditional ideas of "gym class."

Just as there is no magic formula for attacking childhood obesity, there is also no one-size-fits-all formula for schools delivering physical

education. My team works with almost 1,500 schools to solve problems with facilities, scheduling, and staffing.

As this Committee and the House consider setting new national standards for minutes of physical education, I encourage you to also consider that increasing minutes of instruction by itself does not necessarily create a quality program or more minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity.

Here's another New York City example. We created the first ever city-wide middle school sport and fitness program called C.H.A.M.P.S. which stands for Cooperative Healthy Active Motivated Positive Students.

Instead of the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, C.H.A.M.P.S. offers students a range of 1,000 traditional and non-traditional sports and fitness programs in 200 middle schools. If you like baseball, basketball, or track and field, we've got a program for you. Not interested? What about dance, crew, double dutch, or yoga? We've got those, too.

School districts also need to consider how they can effectively interact with local public health agencies to inform families about requirements for healthy fitness. Under Mayor Bloomberg's leadership in New York City, the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene are collaborating in new ways to pool resources and work together to leverage changes in health and fitness habits.

One of our most successful collaborations will soon generate national attention. We took decades of research from the Cooper Institute of Aerobic Research and Human Kinetics and adapted it to the needs of our students. The result is NYC FITNESSGRAM, which measures components of health-related fitness in our students: their aerobic capacity, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, and body composition. Last year about 640,000 public school students in all grades took home NYC FITNESSGRAM reports in one of nine home languages.

The data from these student reports is shared with the Department of Health, which is creating the country's largest longitudinal database of

student fitness. We are beginning to look at how fitness levels influence student's core academic achievement. We continue to tailor our professional development to demonstrate for teachers how their instruction bolsters student fitness levels.

This year Chancellor Klein included the completion of NYC FITNESSGRAM reports as one of the criteria used in principals' annual job performance reviews as part of his accountability initiative. We are now not only "talking the talk, we are also walking the walk" when it comes to fitness education.

In closing I want to echo something else the Mayor and Chancellor stressed last week. New York City is on the right track when it comes to physical education, excellence and achievement are the cornerstones of our approach, but we have a lot of work ahead of us. The fact remains that only 53 percent of students are at a healthy weight. The immediate and long-term personal and social consequences of that fact are devastating in terms of health care costs, and educational and employment opportunities for our students.

As you consider legislation, I encourage you to look at schools as a tool and lever for changes in fitness. Let me leave you today with an interesting question. You might also ask your colleagues, family and friends. .

The question is: "When you were in school did you like gym class? Why—or why not?"

Here's my answer: "I am a native New Yorker and a proud graduate of public schools. But I hated gym class. I felt fat, awkward, and unsuccessful. I hated team sports, and that's all there was to do."

The United States must create future generations who answer this way: "Physical education changed my life. I found activities that I was at good at...things that I enjoyed doing. Teachers showed me how those activities contributed to good health, and that's still an important part of my life. My teachers taught me and now I teach my children."

**Thank you for this opportunity to speak today, and I would welcome your questions today or at any time in the future.**