

TESTIMONY BY
NYC COMPTROLLER WILLIAM C. THOMPSON, JR.
BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
RE. THE IMPORTANCE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION
IN THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

THURSDAY, JANUARY 31, 2008

Chairwoman Nolan and distinguished members of the Education Committee, good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to testify today on the importance of physical education to the health and well being of students in the New York City public school system.

In September my office released a report indicating that while in many neighborhoods of the City people are getting healthier, lower income New Yorkers are suffering increasingly diminished health outcomes.

That report, "Health and Wealth: Assessing and Addressing Health Disparities in New York City," showed that between 1990 and 2005, disparities in hospitalization and mortality rates based on income have widened among New York City neighborhoods for heart disease, cancer and, particularly, diabetes.

Equally disturbing, we found that the poorest neighborhoods had the fewest number of primary care physicians per capita. The implications of these findings for our city's low income children are of great concern.

Statistics show that the incidence of childhood obesity has quadrupled in New York State since the 1970s and tripled in the past 10 years alone. Obesity is associated with Type II, or late onset, diabetes, which is increasingly afflicting children and has reached epidemic levels in New York State.

We found that between 1990 and 2005, the total number of hospitalizations for late onset diabetes in the city increased by 82.9 percent. During that same period, diabetes hospitalization rates more than doubled in five low income neighborhoods.

Obesity is likewise associated with heart disease and cancer, and our health disparities report showed a dramatic increase in both the incidence and disparities by income for these diseases as well.

To address this growing problem, we recommended that the State take several measures to expand access to primary and preventive care for all New Yorkers and redouble our fight against diabetes.

One important means of tackling the problem that we identified was to expand physical education in our city's public schools, particularly in the elementary and middle schools. The reason is the simple fact that obesity has a strong linkage to inactivity.

The State has very clear regulations for physical education in our public schools:

- Students in Kindergarten through the 3rd grade must receive physical education every day.
- Fourth, fifth and sixth graders must participate in phys ed no fewer than 3 times a week.
- Students in the 7th and 8th grades, as well as students in high school, must attend and participate in phys ed for not less than 3 times a week for one semester and not less than 2 times a week for the other semester.
- All students must receive a minimum of 120 minutes of physical education independent of dressing and showering time.
- Recess time – for instance the time after lunch sometimes spent in school courtyards – does not count toward these requirements.

Unfortunately, there is currently no means of determining whether students in New York City are currently receiving the mandated time for physical education. Anecdotal evidence collected by my office suggests that they are not.

Just a few of the letters we have received from parents around the city will highlight some of the problems the city is currently experiencing.¹

One parent of a child at PS 229 in Queens District 24 writes that her son, a first grader, has gym class only 1 day a week for 15 to 20 minutes.

This school, built 40 years ago, has a current enrollment of 1,300. The gym is shared with the cafeteria, but because of the large student body, lunch begins at 10 AM and continues through the day, making it impossible to use that space for physical education.

While the students at this school often get outside for recess after lunch, the kids are not required to do so.

Another parent with a child in 2nd grade at PS 166 in Manhattan's District 3 writes that her daughter gets one 40-minute period of gym one time a week. She says

¹ Letters collected by our policy shop.

that school officials and recess aides frequently keep the kids indoors due to minor weather issues.

Still another parent reports that his son receives roughly 80-90 minutes of physical education instruction a week in one double period. Because of the demands of homework, there is little time for his son to participate in physical activities after school.

This parent notes that it would be difficult for his son's school to program more physical education classes, as they are already taxed for space and some students at the school take their gym classes at the local YMCA.

The issue of space is of great concern. According to the Community Education Council for District 15 in Brooklyn there is a crisis of space for physical education classes. Many schools in the district were built without gyms, and there are currently no gyms at 7 elementary schools in the district.

On the City Department of Education's Learning Environment Survey Report for 2006-2007, 11 percent of students replied that they were not offered a physical education class at their school. Another four percent said that while their school provided physical education classes, they did not take them.

So it is no wonder that one parent took the time to write us, "Who is responsible and accountable for ensuring that students are getting the physical education time that is required and mandated?" Who indeed?

Governor Spitzer has offered leadership in his support for the Healthy Schools Act, which would mandate nutrition and dietary standards and require schools to develop wellness policies and more opportunities for physical activity during the school day.

The governor also instructed the State Comptroller to conduct school district audits to ensure compliance with State physical education requirements.

This is a great first step, but I believe that the New York City Department of Education must also seek to determine how many students are getting the physical education class time that is required and mandated for them.

Rather than basing our policy on anecdotal information, we must reach out to every school for an assessment of how they are, or are not, meeting the State physical education requirements. I requested such an assessment from New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein last October, but have yet to hear back from him.

To its credit the City has created the Office of Fitness and Health Education, headed by Lori Rose Benson. This office, which reports to both the City DOE and

the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, has a mandate to counter epidemics in obesity, diabetes, teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS.

The office has developed Health Smart, a new health curriculum, and administers the Fitnessgram pilot program, which evaluates student fitness in a report provided to students and parents.

Included in the report is an indication of whether a given student's body mass index, or BMI, puts them in a healthy fitness zone.

As many of you know, the BMI is a helpful measure of obesity and this information could be a very useful means of determining trends in childhood obesity in New York.

But if this program is to be effective, it is imperative that the results be widely disseminated and used as the basis for specific programmatic adjustments that address the findings. Results that sit in a drawer are no more likely to be noticed than a tree falling in an empty forest.

Further, the results must be matched by opportunities for students to improve their BMI where necessary through regular exercise and good nutrition. With no current federal requirement for physical education in our public schools, passage of the Healthy Schools Act is more important than ever.

For our most disadvantaged youth especially, ignoring physical and mental health needs can have a particularly damaging impact on academic success.

Given the results of my office's disparity study, it is imperative that we now give student health and fitness the priority they deserve. It is no exaggeration to say that the future of our City and State depends on it.

I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony at this important hearing and now I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.