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Health And Physical Education Are Core Academic Subjects

By: Stephen F. Gambescia , For *The Bulletin*

Implementation of the federally-mandated No Child Left Behind (NCLB) student, teacher and school academic achievement initiative has been overwhelming for all those who play a key role in the education of our elementary and secondary school students.

So it may seem odd to propose for the next reauthorization of this act something additional that we really need to do if we expect students to be ready to learn. NCLB should include health education and physical education as core subject areas that require a highly qualified teacher.

NCLB is a relatively straightforward student standard, achievement-based initiative that understandably focuses on the "core academic subjects," such as English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography.

NCLB asks that teachers of these subjects be highly qualified. "Highly qualified" generally means that the teacher (a) holds a minimum of a bachelor's degree, (b) has obtained full state certification as a teacher or passed the state-sponsored teacher licensing examination and holds a license to teach in the state, and (c) has demonstrated subject-matter competency in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches.

Unfortunately, two foundational subjects that do much to ready a student to learn do not have to have a highly qualified teacher. Consequently students are being exposed less to health education and physical education classes in our schools, and when a teacher is present, there is no NCLB incentive or oversight to ensure that the teacher is highly qualified, as is needed in the other subjects mentioned above.

If we expect our students to prosper academically, they must be healthy and fit. Health education programs that meet national standards and have

qualified teachers improve students' health literacy as well as communication and decision making, stress management, peer pressure resistance to risky behavior and positive goal setting skills.

Some may think that physical education and health class are incidental subject matters in school. We know that structured, curriculum-based physical education programs taught daily by well-qualified teachers not only improve student fitness but improve academic performance in some standardized tests.

Ensuring that no child is left behind on basic learning skills must also include a concomitant commitment to our children's health and fitness. We are reading almost daily about the alarming rise in child and adolescent obesity. Health risky behaviors that are often established during youth contribute markedly to the nation's major cause of death including heart disease, cancer, diabetes and injuries.

Requiring teachers to be highly qualified in health education and physical education should not be a burden to schools. In fact, school health and fitness programs fare better when a coordinated school health program is in place. Teachers, administrators and specialists already recognize the importance of promulgating health enhancing information and developing healthy decision-making and choices among students. The qualified health and physical education teacher can easily serve as the cross-trainer or technical assistant on school health enhancing policies and practices, as well as teaching in the classroom.

Sequelae due to risky behaviors invariably have short-term and even long-term academic impact. Consider, for example, that one underage drinking infraction buys a student a multiple-day suspension and could set the student back an estimated two weeks in his/her studies. Students who are energized and mentally alert tend to have fewer disciplinary problems and absences. A most dramatic example is teenage pregnancy that derails for years an adolescent achieving basic education.

Health education and physical education should be on the list of subjects taught that require a highly qualified teacher. This support helps all students learn critical life skills that enable them to prosper academically and then grow into healthy, productive citizens.

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