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# Creating a Culture of Movement

## The Benefits of Promoting Physical Activity in Schools and the Workplace

U.S. Congressman Zach Wamp

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**T**he human body was made to move. We must work to become a nation that exercises more, because our country faces a serious threat in the obesity epidemic. A decline in physical activity has been a significant factor in the unprecedented rise in obesity. Six years ago, I founded the Congressional Fitness Caucus to raise awareness about the obesity epidemic and advocate for initiatives encouraging physical activity and healthy living, particularly in children. When children acquire dynamic exercising habits, they can grow to lead active and healthy lives as adults, increasing productivity along the way.

A troubling consequence of obesity is the growing number of children experiencing health problems such as type 2 diabetes, with anticipated higher lifetime risk of hypertension, coronary heart disease, stroke, respiratory problems, and some cancers. The rise in obesity-related health conditions also has high economic costs and has greatly increased healthcare spending. If we do not change our lifestyles, and the lifestyles of our children, our Medicare and Medicaid systems will be overwhelmed.

The most effective and practical way to combat rising healthcare costs is for both children and adults to engage in physical activity. Because students and employees spend so many hours each week either in class or at the workplace, school districts and employers can take positive steps with the help of Congressional action to help promote physical activity to improve their health. Children need to be physically well to be able to learn, and there is no question that productivity increases and employer costs go down as wellness programs are implemented.

By the fourth grade, every child should know that there are adverse consequences to a sedentary lifestyle. We are often over-medicating many younger children when research and common sense both clearly demonstrate that sweat is the most effective antidepressant ever invented. Children sleep, work, and perform much better with a daily regimen of physical activity. Despite the staggering social and economic costs of childhood obesity, many schools are cutting back on physical

education and health education programs because of budgetary concerns and the demand for stronger academic standards in math, reading, and science. In fact, only 3.8% of elementary schools, 7.9% of middle schools, and 2.1% of high schools provide daily physical education or its equivalent for all grades during the entire school year.<sup>1</sup> Congressional action is needed to incentivize increased physical education to improve academic performance and provide students with the physical activity and education that will help them lead healthy lifestyles.

To strengthen physical education in our nation's schools and address the childhood obesity epidemic, I worked with Congressmen Ron Kind of Wisconsin and Jay Inslee of Washington State to author the Fitness Integrated with Teaching (FIT) Kids Act, H.R. 3257. We wanted a bill that would engage parents and the public by asking all schools, districts, and states to report on students' physical activity, and one that would help faculty and staff learn new ways to promote kids' healthy lifestyles and physical activity through professional development opportunities. The bill would also authorize a study and pilot program to support effective ways to combat childhood obesity and improve healthy living and physical activity for all children. The FIT Kids Act is a bipartisan bill that has the support of more than 40 combined health, education, and physical activity organizations.

The workplace is also a great arena to promote a culture of physical activity. Businesses are currently permitted to deduct the cost of on-site workout facilities, which are provided for the benefit of employees, on a pre-tax basis, without counting them as additional income. However, it is not feasible for every employer to provide an on-site facility. Should a business want or need to outsource these health improvement services, employees who receive the off-site fitness center subsidy are required to pay income tax on this benefit, and employers bear the associated administrative costs of complying with Internal Revenue Service rules. To provide a balanced tax treatment of employee fitness center memberships, I introduced the Workplace Health Improvement Program (WHIP) Act, H.R. 1748, which would ensure that the wellness benefit from off-site fitness facilities is not taxed as income for employees. The legislation would also reaffirm the deductibility of

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the employer cost of subsidizing employee fitness center benefits.

The research community, and, in particular, the Active Living Research program, has done an exceptional job of highlighting the rising obesity epidemic and the need to promote physical activity. This research has led the way to provide greater awareness about the social and economic costs of sedentary lifestyles and how we can work together to create environments to get people moving. A strong consensus in our nation is building to promote greater physical activity, due mostly to this research and the concerns with the negative social and economic affects of obesity. The public and private sectors must continue to build on this momentum and work together to identify and advocate ways to encourage physical activity in our communities.

The Active Living Research program has given policymakers, urban planners, and public health professionals critical knowledge about how proactive policies and environments can promote physical activity. In 2004, I launched the Tennessee on the Move program, an obesity-prevention initiative in the State of Tennessee that has served nearly 25,000 adults and children to help them take positive steps toward healthy lifestyles. These grassroots programs, combined with vital studies from Active Living Research, can assist public officials in promoting policy and funding in health care, transportation, and other fields that will encourage physical activity and healthy living in our communities.

As advocates for active and healthy living, the research and statistics are on our side to bring about a culture of movement, particularly in schools and the workplace. Future research will be vital not only to show the growing trend of obesity and its impacts, but also to

highlight the benefits to schools and employers in promoting physical activity and healthier students and employees. Regular physical activity strengthens academic performance and improves the overall physical and emotional health of children and teens. One study has explicitly shown that regular physical activity during the school day improves concentration and cognitive performance.<sup>2</sup> By encouraging more physical activity for students, schools will also see the benefits in higher math and reading test scores. Research shows that it is possible to have active healthy children and good academic performance. Physical activity could lead not only to lower medical costs for employees and employers, but also to greater productivity for the organization.

The more people we can encourage to have a regimen of physical activity in their lives and take better care of themselves, the better off we will be as a society. Research has played a critical role in strengthening awareness and understanding of the growing obesity epidemic. The documented social and economic costs of obesity are now simply too high to ignore. We must continue to engage in this essential cause and highlight not only the benefits of physical activity for individuals, but also the benefits to schools and employers. In doing so, we will be on the way to creating a culture of movement that will improve academic performance and productivity, decrease medical costs and save lives.

## References

1. CDC. School Health Policies and Programs Study (SHPPS) 2006. *J Sch Health*. 2007;77(8).
2. Trost SG. Active education: physical education, physical activity and academic performance research brief. San Diego CA: Active Living Research, 2007. [www.activelivingresearch.org](http://www.activelivingresearch.org).