

# Special Report

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# 'GET KIDS MOVING HOWEVER WE CAN'



KATE LONG | Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

As part of the state push to increase physical activity, Webster County high school seniors taught active games to kindergartners at Diana Elementary. Senior Levi Stout (left), who wants to be a pediatrician, said, "I understand a lot more now about why its important for kids to be active."

## FIVE DAYS A WEEK?

### Daily physical activity is affordable

By Kate Long  
Staff writer

In 2007, legislators asked the state Department of Education how much it would cost for every student to have physical education five days a week.

"It seemed like the obvious step to take," said Sen. Erik Wells, D-Kanawha.

One in four fifth-graders has high blood pressure and cholesterol. One in four eleven-year-olds is obese, a clear red flag for the future.

They sent the department a resolution that began with "Whereas, seven of 10 West Virginians will die of heart disease, cancer or stroke; and whereas, 28 percent of West Virginia fifth-graders

... have one or more cardiovascular risk factors ..."

"We knew that, if we could get our kids active, we could prevent a lot of type 2 diabetes, obesity and heart disease," said Sen. Dan Foster, D-Kanawha.

But to their dismay, state Department

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DON CHAPMAN  
Assistant director, state  
Office of Healthy Schools



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MELANIE PURKEY  
Director, state Office of Healthy Schools



"We need to get kids more active, and qualified physical education teachers should be the ones to do it."

DALE LEE  
President, West Virginia  
Education Association



# ACTIVITY

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of Education officials told them daily PE would cost between \$13 million and \$1.5 billion.

“The legislators got upset at us for that,” said Melanie Purkey, director of the state Office of Healthy Schools, “but they asked for the cost of physical education, not the cost of physical activity.”

Wells is still upset. “The department knowingly and effectively killed any effort to have physical education five days a week,” he said. “At interims, when Melanie said \$1.5 billion, you could just see legislators shifting to ‘Well, we can forget that.’”

“I have learned that when the department doesn’t want something, they put a high estimate on it,” he said.

“We had to give them a range, so we had to include the worst case scenario,” Purkey said. The \$1.5 billion included a gym for every school that didn’t have one, she said. The low end, \$13 million, added classroom space only. “We don’t need all those new gyms and classrooms, just to get kids moving five days a week,” Wells said.

Purkey agrees. There are other ways kids can be active every day for a fraction of that cost, she told the Gazette-Mail in January. In the past five years, given the obesity epidemic, there has been a national movement to get kids moving through physical activity, she said.

“If the Legislature had asked us for the cost of daily physical activity, instead of physical education, the numbers would have been much lower,” she said.

“As soon as you use the words ‘physical education,’ you run into code and policy requirements:” teacher certification, facility specifications, scheduling and teacher/pupil ratio,” she said. “We had to take all that into account.”

“Physical activity” has no such requirements under West Virginia law. It means get kids moving: running, jumping rope, zumba, walking, whatever. Anyone approved by a school can supervise physical activity. It can happen anywhere, anytime it fits.

Physical education involves classroom time, learning about the body and its functions. Physical activity is simply moving the body. “Physical activity costs very little and is very doable,” Purkey said. “You can require all kids to participate.”

“Well, why didn’t they say that five years ago?” Wells asked. “Why didn’t they say then that daily physical education may

## The Research: Physical activity

With the help of the West Virginia Prevention Research Center, we have reviewed the research on physical activity as it relates to obesity and chronic disease and have compiled online links that will help you learn about it yourself. The list is encouraging for those who decide to exercise. Sample titles include:

- Regular exercise lowers many health risks, including dementia and some cancers.
- Regular participation in physical activity is associated with improved academic performance.

■ When between 14 and 26 percent of time is devoted to physical activity, children learn more rapidly, equaling and sometimes exceeding that of kids who did not have that activity.

■ Children who are often distracted consistently improve in their ability to concentrate after exercise.

■ Teenagers who are not physically active are more likely to be involved in harmful behaviors and have lower self-esteem than those who are active.

■ Children who watch more than two hours of television a day, especially in their bedrooms, are more likely to be inactive and become obese.

■ Teens who spend more time at computers become less active as they grow older.

■ Moderate exercise for 30 minutes a day, plus 7 percent weight loss, reduces diabetes risk by 58 percent.

■ By 2035, there will be an additional 100,000 cases of coronary heart disease if the trend in adolescent obesity is not stopped.

■ Children’s life expectancy is cut short by obesity and inactivity.

For a full list of links, visit [sundaygazette.com/theshapewerein](http://sundaygazette.com/theshapewerein)

## How much P.E. is required by law?

National physical education groups and health professionals recommend at least five half-hour sessions of physical education a week for elementary kids and 225 minutes a week for middle and high school students.

West Virginia falls short. As of 2005, state law requires:

■ Three half-hour sessions a week for elementary children.

■ Thirty minutes a day for one semester for middle school kids, then no more for the rest of the year. Many schools collapse it into 18 weeks,

then none.

■ Only one semester in four years for high school students.

The state Department of Education urges schools to add more physical activity in addition to formal physical education classes, with a goal of daily exercise for every child.

not be doable, but there’s something else we can do?”

“We tried to tell them,” Purkey said.

“We don’t want more bad PE,” of the type that causes kids to hate exercising or is a classroom, non-movement situation. “We’re concentrating on improving the quality of what we have.”

## The difference between education and activity

State Schools Superintendent Jorea Marple is a strong advocate of daily exercise, any way it can happen. “We’ve got to look at what’s possible,” she said.

Cash-strapped West Virginia could get kids moving every day through a combination of physical education and physical activity, she said earlier this month.

In the past five years, many school systems nationwide have adopted the PE/physical activity combination, Purkey said. At least 12 states require daily physical activity outside of the required amount of physical education, according to the National Association of State Boards of Education.

The cost? “I can hire somebody to run good physical activity sessions for half of what I pay a good PE teacher,” said Don Chapman, assistant director of the Office of Healthy Schools.

“Parent volunteers run those sessions in some school systems,” Purkey said.

Teachers’ groups don’t like that idea. “They’re trying to piecemeal it instead of realizing it’ll take money to fix the problem,” said Dale Lee, president of the West Virginia Education Association. “We lead the nation in obesity. We need to get kids more active, and qualified phys-

ical education teachers should be the ones to do it.”

“We’re not trying to replace PE teachers,” Chapman said. On days when the children don’t have PE, he said, a trained person can still lead children in physical activity like zumba and races.

Elementary children must have a half hour of PE. three times a week, by state law. “A child could have physical education three days a week, then do physical activity two days,” Purkey said.

## And then there’s recess

Crowded school schedules can be a roadblock, Purkey said, so, nationwide, many school systems are organizing games and structured activities at recess and after lunch. They have recess coaches. “We’d like to do that, too,” she said. The Department of Education has been looking at an elementary-level program called PlayWorks.

A problem: West Virginia law does not require recess, and many schools are skipping it, to give themselves more time to prep kids for standardized tests, she said.

State school board policy strongly recommends recess before lunch for elementary schools, but schools are free to ignore recommendations.

“The crunch of No Child Left Behind has made teachers nervous about instructional time and time to reteach kids who aren’t getting it, so we’re seeing recess get taken away,” Purkey said.

“And even when a school has recess, some schools use it for discipline and take it away if a child didn’t do well academically,” she said. “That’s backwards from what the research tells us

is good for kids.

“The Department of Education has never required recess because we never thought anyone would want to drop it,” she said, “but it looks like we need to require it, and we probably need to help schools understand why children need it.”

“We obviously need to pick up this conversation and continue it,” said Brent Boggs, the House of Delegates majority leader from Braxton County. “Daily exercise seems like the most basic way we could help with childhood obesity and lower type 2 diabetes. We can pay for it now or pay much more later in medical costs and lack of workplace productivity.”

The state School Building Authority gives counties money to build new gyms and other school facilities, but it usually wants counties to come up with part of the money first, “and people aren’t in the mood to vote for that,” Chapman said. That’s another reason for looking at physical activity, he said. Levies that included gymnasiums failed recently in Jackson and Marion

counties, he noted.

Ginny Ehrlich, CEO of Alliance for a Healthier Generation, sponsored by the American Heart Association, oversees a network of 14,000 schools. “When it’s done well, it’s not an either/or,” she said. “Both physical education and less formal physical activity are part of the overall equation for childhood obesity prevention.”

Senator Wells is leery that physical activity might have no structure. “If they just let kids out for recess and call it physical activity, you could end up with half the kids standing around texting,” he said.

Trained people should lead the sessions, and they should involve all students, Purkey said.

“It may not be something we can fix all at once,” Boggs said. “But we could at least start to fix the problem and maybe look at some pilot projects.”

Wells is submitting a new resolution, this time requesting that the Joint Committee on Government and Finance conduct “a study of multiple topics,

## Physical activity ideas for parents

■ Be active yourself. Let your kids see you walking, biking, swimming. Play ball or do other physical activities with them.

■ Limit TV time and screen time (video games, texting, computer) to two hours or less per day. Screen time has been linked to obesity by many research projects. When children are in front of a screen, they are not active.

■ Inventory your kids’ toys. Which cause them to be physically active? When you choose toys, think about that.

■ Make it easy for your child to be active every day. Invest in a basketball hoop or a small trampoline. If your child wants to be on a team, do what you can to get him or her there.

■ Think of safe outdoor places where your child can play with other kids. Make active play dates with parents of other kids in places where children and adults can throw a Frisbee or have races.

Find more ideas and resources at [sundaygazette.com/theshapewerein](http://sundaygazette.com/theshapewerein)

Sources: KidsHealth.org; Centers for Disease Control; Weight-control Information Network; National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

all related to health, nutrition and wellness programs in public schools; including fitness requirements, nutrition in school meals and the inclusion of West Virginia food products in school meals.”

“We need to look at the whole problem and make sure we do something effective,” he said.

“We’d be glad to have that conversation,” Purkey said.

Reach Kate Long at [katelong@wvgazette.com](mailto:katelong@wvgazette.com) or 304-348-1798.