

Make sure, wherever kids grow up, they can be active.



Part of reducing and preventing childhood obesity is ensuring kids can grow up in communities and schools supportive of active, healthy living.

Doctors and researchers have looked into the question of where children tend to be most physically fit. Not surprisingly, it's in the places that make it easy for children to live a healthy life. Where children can safely walk or ride a bike, where schools offer quality physical education, and where there are parks to play in and child-friendly spaces outside, more kids exercise in their daily life. Yet in the places with a lot of barriers to physical activity, Texas' obesity challenge is growing.¹

What to Know:

- Fitness in childhood promotes a host of physical, social, and cognitive benefits, including improved focus and behavior in the classroom.^{2,3} **Kids with good fitness tend to perform better in school** and score higher on achievement tests,⁴ including Texas' own exams.⁵
- Researchers have found that infrastructure like roads, schools, parks, neighborhoods, and transit systems—**our built environments—factor into how active kids are** in a community. In 1969, 87% of children in elementary and middle school who lived within a mile of a school walked or rode a bike there. By 2009, with more cars on the road and many neighborhoods without sidewalks, that number dropped to 35%.⁶
- **Texas has the seventh-highest rate of childhood obesity** in the country; more than 20% of our 10- to 17-year-olds are already obese,⁷ and lack of exercise is one reason why. Obesity is preventable, but it's linked to a host of other health problems: higher levels of cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, breathing problems, musculoskeletal discomfort, social/emotional challenges, and serious health problems later in life.⁸ Preventing obesity in childhood would make a huge difference for communities' health for years to come.
- Kids spend a lot of their day learning, and **the amount of exercise children get at school factors into their fitness**. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that children participate in 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day.⁹ Physical education encourages exercise, but many Texas school districts are eliminating physical education and related courses in some grade levels.¹⁰
- **Fitness and opportunities to be active and maintain that fitness in childhood affect a person well into adulthood.**¹¹ The documented links between fitness and academics¹² suggest increasing physical activity is a good way to curb the obesity epidemic while putting kids on a path to school success, followed by life successes. School attendance¹³ and overall school performance¹⁴ would likely improve if fewer Texas youth were obese.
- **Networks of safe sidewalks and bike paths would also help kids be more active.**^{15,16} To encourage active transportation, the Centers for Disease Control and The Institute of Medicine of the National Academies recommend complete streets, which are roads thoughtfully designed to be safe for not just driving but walking and bicycling, too.¹⁷
- **The Texas legislature has shown bipartisan support for improving the built environment and improving P.E.** over the years. One example is Safe Routes to School.¹⁸ In 2010, the Texas Transportation Commission administered \$54 million in grants for 200 new Safe Routes to Schools projects, which have been shown to increase weekly physical activity levels for children.¹⁹
- **Children can't control the safety of their neighborhoods, the condition of sidewalks and bikeways, or the amount of time allowed for physical activity in school.** It falls to us and our policies to help improve the built environment and promote fitness in schools.

How to Make it Happen:

- **Make it safer for kids to walk or bicycle for health:** Texas can make sure future transportation projects and plans include complete streets that are safe for motorists, pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transit users of all ages. With more walkable communities, more Texans will grow up with active transportation of the sort most of today's adults grew up experiencing.^{20, 21}
- **Increase the physical education requirement in middle school by one semester:** Increasing PE from four semesters to five semesters in middle school will not only help improve fitness and address youth obesity in early adolescence; research shows it's also a good strategy to put more students on the path to academic success. Increasing fitness now would lead to a more vibrant future workforce, healthier families, and ultimately a more prosperous Texas.

For more information: <http://tinyurl.com/PoundsofCure>

Thinking About Costs

Helping Texans get fit and implementing complete streets policies can bring economic benefits: Our state would save \$19 billion over the next decade if average body mass index here could be brought down by just 5%. If smarter infrastructure design occurs, we also may avoid costly retrofit projects and see improved economic activity. For example, adding a Dallas public rail line in the 1990s reduced car use and led more people to navigate downtown shops on foot, while increasing retail sales in the area by 33% (compared to only 3% sales growth in the rest of the city).

Sources



"Thinking about Costs"

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