The Colorado Health Foundation™



Private PE Efforts Shine, but Statewide School Activity Lag Casts Shadows

On a bright winter morning in Westminster, elementary school kids are screaming happily as they swing, run, chase, pull and push across every square inch of a cheery, fall-forgiving playground.

The up-to-date action environment in Metz Elementary's yard is a friendly giant looming over the children in school-bus yellow and grape-purple. This 9:30 a.m. recess shows school kids doing exactly what they are supposed to do: burning off calories and dissipating nervous energy before their next classroom focus.

But a recent statewide assessment of school physical activity, sponsored in part by the Foundation, shows in stark terms that these frenetic, successful moments at schools like Metz are all too rare across Colorado. Our kids need school-based physical education and activity more than ever to combat rising obesity and improve classroom attention. But budget constraints and testing demands make Colorado PE a dice roll rather than a rule for most kids.

Districts like Westminster that have had some success are the first to admit they could never have afforded new playgrounds — or teacher training, or creative PE programs — without outside funding.

"Being 48th or 49th in educational funding nationwide puts us at a level where the moneys we receive barely take care of the payroll and heat the buildings. Blow a 1960s-model boiler one year and you are putting off other projects like this playground until five to 10 years down the road," said Westminster Public Schools' director of student services, Anthony Streno.

"Without grants, we'd be in horrible shape, no pun intended," Streno said.

The foundation joined other members of the PE for All Colorado Coalition to commission a report on "the state of PE." (Other members include The Colorado Children's Campaign, American Heart Association, LiveWell Colorado, Denver Health and more.) The sobering assessment concludes:

- PE programs across Colorado vary widely, in both quantity of students reached and quality of instruction offered.
- Minimal state standards translate to little measurement or accountability in PE progress.
- Colorado children do not get enough formal PE or general activity in their day. Budget limits and increased academic demands on time are the main culprits.
- All Colorado kids should receive daily PE time, with skilled professionals in charge.

The report digs into a few districts where private funding and innovation created better PE. In Aurora Public Schools, dedicated and highly trained elementary teachers like Chris Strater get economically disadvantaged kids moving. Yet Aurora's high schools no longer have a PE requirement for graduation.

St. Vrain School District created a "lending library" of more-expensive PE equipment that piques student interest. Schools can check out the cool games for a rotation of intriguing new skills. Schools like Metz Elementary and Skyline Vista Elementary in Westminster overhauled aging, under-used playgrounds in recent years and implemented innovative movement programs like Celebrate the Beat for dance and movement. Streno called it a "huge hit."

"One clear message is that a PE plan works," Streno said. Another clear message, echoed by the PE for All Colorado Report, is that schools "just don't have the funding to do these things without an outside group."

READ STATE OF PE REPORT

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