

# REQUIRE HEALTH EDUCATION



## *Policy Brief*

Oklahoma is one of the unhealthiest states in the nation. The United Health Foundation ranks the state 47th in the overall health of its residents in 2007, slipping from 44th in 2006. Oklahoma ranks at the very bottom of all health risk factors:

• Income	47	• Tobacco Use	47
• Exercise	47	• Nutrition	50
• Health Insurance	44	• Mental Illness	50
• H.S. Education	41	• Diabetes	46
• College Education	47	• Heart disease	50

Business leaders know that when Oklahoma ranks so poorly in key health issues, it hurts their efforts to recruit and retain talent. Those engaged in efforts to address major health issues understand that healthy workers are more productive and absent less often, and help employers control rising health insurance costs. With 50 cents of each health care dollar being used to treat preventable diseases, there is a strong need for greater personal responsibility and better lifestyle choices.

In order to make good choices, however, Oklahoma residents need to know what the choices are, and to be well informed about the consequences of their choices. Unfortunately, ***Oklahoma is one of only two states in the nation that has no requirement in our public schools for health education***, even though the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend comprehensive health education in grades kindergarten through 12.

### **Oklahoma Research: Healthy students are smarter students!**

Researchers at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center and Oklahoma State University Nutrition Services recently completed a comparative study of eight Oklahoma elementary schools with similar demographics regarding ethnicity, free/reduced lunch and student/teacher ratios. The four model schools participated in a Coordinated School Health Program, including fitness testing, physical education and nutrition education. At the end of the study, not only were the students healthier and fitter, but in each case, the API scores in the pilot schools

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

The 2009 Children's Agenda supports establishing a health education requirement in grades 6-8 in Oklahoma public schools, in accordance with the PASS (Priority Academic Student Skills) guidelines. The topics of instruction will be determined by each local school district, and should include, but not be limited to:

- Physical activity
- Nutrition
- Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs
- Behavioral health
- Oral health
- Environmental health
- Growth and development
- Injury prevention
- Wellness

The PASS Guidelines state that a "well-informed, self-directed student has the foundation for leading a healthy, productive life. By recognizing that many health problems and causes can be prevented, children can reduce many of the risks generally encountered during adolescence and adulthood."

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rose dramatically – in one case over 260%. Healthy and fit students learn better and are creating healthy habits that will carry over into their work lives.

### **Results of Changes in School Policies**

Schools by themselves cannot – and should not – be expected to address the nation’s most serious health and social problems. But changing school policies can make a significant difference in establishing positive health habits that will lay the foundation for future good health. In 2005, the Oklahoma legislature reinstated physical education in grades K-5, when only about one-third of our students were physically active for the recommended 60 minutes a day for five or more days per week. By 2007, that number had risen to almost 50%, a 30% increase in just two years!

### **Status of Health Education in Oklahoma**

In 2008, the P.E. requirement in grades K-5 was expanded to include health and nutrition education, along with additional P.E. Yet there is no requirement of this nature in the upper grades. About half of the 539 schools districts offer some type of physical education or health and nutrition classes in grades 6-8 that are attended by roughly 58,000 of the 135,000 students.

Many classes are being taught by certified teachers in the classroom. In some districts, schools call upon one of the 28 health educators employed by county health departments throughout the state to provide health education. In addition, many community groups, including local hospitals, offer their nutritionists, social workers, nurses, county extension workers and other professionals, to provide health education to students.