

Building the Evidence: Investing in Research Supporting the Need for Healthy and Active Schools

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At the Kansas Health Foundation (KHF), we believe that the public education system is critical for developing future generations. Today's young Kansans will someday serve as key decisionmakers, comprise our workforce, and raise our families. They are the key to a future where Kansas is the healthiest, most productive, most livable state in the country.

But those leading our education system today face an enormous amount of pressure, from funding issues to curriculum changes, from absenteeism to state assessment scores. With so much to consider and so much to fit into each school day, leaders are often forced to make decisions that de-prioritize an important aspect of a child's development: physical activity. As a result, some Kansas schools have resorted to decreasing recess time and even eliminating physical education classes.

However, there is a growing body of evidence showing that physical activity plays a key role in academic performance.

Following discussions with numerous stakeholders, we found that a critical missing piece in making the case for the importance of physical activity at school was timely, state-specific data linking student fitness and academics. Without this compelling data, school leaders would continue to be reluctant to dedicate long-term attention and resources to physical activity. Armed with that knowledge, the foundation decided to make a commitment to support research in Kansas that would make globally-conducted research tangible for decisionmakers here at home.

KANSAS FITNESS INFORMATION TRACKING

In 2011 KHF funded a new statewide initiative to track and improve fitness in Kansas schools. Initiated by the Healthy Kansas Schools program, a partnership between the Kansas State Department of Education and Kansas Department of

Health and Environment, Kansas Fitness Information Tracking (K-FIT) links FitnessGram® test results with academic performance of students in grades four through nine. The FitnessGram® tests, which measure aerobic capacity, muscular strength, endurance, and flexibility, determine whether students are in a "healthy fitness zone" for their age and gender.

The findings, released at a news conference at Seaman Middle School in Topeka in early 2014, highlight aggregate, de-identified data from more than 13,000 students in the fourth through ninth grades during the 2011-2012 school year. The results concluded that the odds of being above math and reading performance standards were significantly higher among students who met fitness standards in all five fitness tests compared to those who did not. For students who met

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In a statement, Kansas Governor Sam Brownback said:

We remain focused on improving the health of Kansas children and making strides in their reading levels. By examining the K-FIT information, we have an opportunity to positively impact the lives of Kansas children and future generations in a variety of ways. I encourage our kids, as well as my adult peers, to never give up on their fitness goals (KHF et al. 2014).

Since this initial release of data, a second year's worth of fitness and academic results has been analyzed. Data for the second year of analysis came from approximately 56,000 students at more than 300 Kansas schools, and the results were quite similar to those from the first year. Students who met a greater number of fitness standards scored higher, on average, on reading and math assessments. Likewise, students who met all five of the fitness standards were absent from school significantly less than students who met two or fewer of the fitness standards. Additionally, student performance on state science assessments was analyzed as part of the latest data, and as with math and reading, students meeting all five fitness standards were more likely to meet or exceed science performance standards than their peers who met fewer of the fitness standards.

There are signs that our state data may be even more compelling in future years. According to the State Department of Education, we can now receive K-FIT data from more than 730 schools now that faculty and staff have been trained in data collection and reporting, which more than doubles the number of schools in the latest data set.

OVERALL EMPHASIS ON HEALTHY SCHOOLS

Our investment in the K-FIT initiative is a reflection of our belief that a comprehensive focus on health and wellness in schools will pay long-term dividends. We have invested more than \$5 million in a number of school-based wellness initiatives centered on making the school buildings and school districts across Kansas healthy environments for our children. The K-FIT program helps to support these efforts by connecting health outcomes with academic success.

In partnership with the State Department of Education, we have worked extensively in areas of physical activity, nutrition, before and after-school programs, classroom “brain breaks,” and the preservation of physical education classes. One such effort was a statewide pilot program called Let’s Move in Kansas Schools. Kansas was the first state to develop a state-level program based on the federal Let’s Move! initiative, and the pilot was designed to facilitate youth activity before, during, and after school to help children reach the 60 minutes of recommended physical activity each day. KHF provided funding for the initiative based on the overarching goal of ensuring that every school delivers a comprehensive physical activity program with quality physical education as the foundation so that youth will develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to be physically active for a lifetime. The pilot effort established a ready infrastructure in the state leading up to the 2013 announcement of the nationwide Let’s Move! Active Schools program.

Much of KHF’s work to-date has focused specifically inside schools and has been targeted toward school leaders. With our latest healthy schools awareness effort, we are also reach-

ing out to parents and family members to try and foster school-family collaborations to make our schools even healthier. According to a recent survey of more than 400 Kansas parents, most parents are not aware of opportunities to help create healthy school environments. In fact, 86 percent of parents are eager for more information about school wellness practices, and nearly 40 percent want to be involved in improving health at their child’s school, but do not know where to start.

In response to this data, KHF has launched Team Up for Kansas Kids (www.teamupforkansaskids.com) to facilitate positive collaboration between schools and families across the

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state and provide interactive wellness resources. In partnership with local education and community leaders, the new effort urges families and educators to pledge to learn more and work together to help ensure that Kansas kids grow up healthy, smart, and strong.

We must prioritize getting our kids active in all schools, whether it includes after-school programs, active recess, quality physical education classes, or an increased culture of activity. We must do this in collaboration with our teachers and administrators who are imparting knowledge upon children in their most impressionable years. What these kids learn at a young age will stay with them in some facet for the rest of their lives.

We are joined in this belief by many outstanding organizations and agencies in our state. Many people are committed to making the school environment a place that helps produce happy, healthy, and academically successful children. At KHF, we are willing to step up and invest our resources to facilitate a pattern of healthy behaviors for Kansas children to pave the way for a lifetime of positive health outcomes.

SOURCES

Kansas Health Foundation (KHF), Kansas State Department of Education, and Kansas Department of Health and Environment. “New Study Shows Positive Relationship between Physical Fitness and Academic Test Scores among Kansas Students.” January 30, 2014. <http://kansashealth.org/sites/default/files/News%20Release%20%28Final%29.pdf>.

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