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Is phys ed poised for a comeback?

By Neal Pierce

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Aiming to combat the tidal wave of obesity among children, Texas has voted to reinstate the mandatory gym classes for elementary students it had eliminated seven years ago to make more room for academics. It's surely a welcome straw in the wind - recognizing, as the ancient Greeks did, the intimate connection of body and mind.

There are so many variables in human behavior that no one has yet produced conclusive evidence that the same physical activity that fights obesity will stimulate the other big need of our times - better minds and thinking. But some researchers clearly believe so. They're suggesting that such physical exercise as running, jumping and aerobic game-playing impact the areas of children's brains that are critical for mental concentration, planning and decision-making. And children who receive daily physical education seem to outperform others in motor fitness, academic performance and positive attitude toward school.

An alarming number of states and school districts seem blind to this. Last year, the surgeon general reported that only 25 percent of U.S. high school students participate in daily physical education, down from 42 percent in the early 1990s. Massachusetts and Idaho are among states that have just recently eliminated major physical education requirements. And studies show that only 10 percent of children now walk or bike to school, compared with a majority a generation ago. Small wonder that childhood obesity in America has increased 42 percent since 1980. One of five teen-agers is now considered seriously overweight.

The health cost implications for the future may well be gruesome. Obesity, notes Dr. Richard Jackson of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "can increase the risk of (adult-onset) type 2 diabetes by as much as 34-fold. Diabetes is a major risk factor for amputations, blindness, kidney failure and heart disease." The U.S. military is already suffering. More than 50 percent of all service personnel weigh more than the standard range for healthy bodies set by the National Institutes of Health. The almost sure result: diminished performance and endurance in combat or other demanding conditions.

Lots of layers roll into the making of a pudgy America. You can track them from couch-potato/high-fat snacking to our auto-dominated, rarely walk routines, from suburban subdivisions built without sidewalks or parks to the excessive time many of us spend in front of computers. At tax time, it's worth noting you can deduct medical costs after you are sick, but you get no credit for weight-reduction efforts - not even a tough, supervised weight-control program, nutritional counseling or a gym-based workout program based on doctor's orders.

Local governments could do a lot to create healthier environments. Instead of letting highways divide and isolate, they can construct full networks of walking, jogging and bicycling paths and separate them from heavy traffic arteries. Rather than saying "yes" to strip mall proposals, they can insist on true town and neighborhood centers within walking or biking distance of homes.

And rules can make a big difference. Municipalities can insist that the stairways in office buildings be open, accessible and safe so people aren't forced onto elevators, even to climb or descend a flight or two. They can tilt the scales toward walking, biking and public transit by limiting new parking facilities. Even in poor neighborhoods, cities can bend their budgets to create playgrounds and gyms comparable in number and quality to middle-class areas. And then local governments need to demand of school boards that they support more community-based schools, sponsor fewer education factories stuck out on the suburban edge. They need to create safe routes for kids to walk or bike to school. And to insist on a rebirth of physical education for all children.

That needn't mean the "same old" phys ed too many of us remember - regimented calisthenics or laps around a track. Or worse, being forced into sports in which just a minority of natural athletes did well and the rest of us felt like failures. *The obvious substitute: phys ed that focuses, at least for those not bent on athletic stardom, on fitness, agility, nutrition, healthy lifestyle. Weight lifting, rock climbing, skating, roller-blading can all be lots of fun, and truly body-building.* (My italics and underlining) And how about the joys of movement in bicycling or swimming - as enjoyable when you're 70 as when you're 10?

No doubt, many Americans will hear the warning bells and eventually become fitter, less obese. And all of us need to aim, as the Greeks suggested, at developing healthy bodies to match strong minds. The secret may be to set that expectation in youth, when life's patterns get set.