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Fitness Pushed To Head Of Class

By MARILYN BROWN, The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - Middle and high school students would be required to take an average of 45 minutes a day of physical education under a proposal from a statewide fitness group appointed by the governor.

Even though the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness calls for phasing in the increase, the Legislature would have to change state law and appropriate money during tight budget times for it to become a mandate.

The proposal would greatly increase what is now required.

There is no state requirement for physical education in middle school. High schools now require two semesters - one year - of a combined physical education class that includes health education or one semester of a physical education elective and one semester of personal fitness.

"It's a step in the right direction," said Steve Vanoer, Hillsborough County schools supervisor for K-12 physical education and health. "It's putting the emphasis where it needs to be."

The elementary school day is more flexible than middle and high school, where class schedules already are packed with more math and English remediation for weaker students and advanced courses for others, he said.

"I don't know how we're going to fit it in," Vanoer said. "If it's a longer school day, you're looking at paying teachers additional salary. That's huge."

Gov. Charlie Crist's goal is to increase physical fitness and reduce the rate of obesity for

Floridians within the next 10 years. So far he has relied mostly on school districts to do the heavy lifting.

This year, Crist pushed through a law requiring 150 minutes a week of physical education in elementary schools, which started in August.

That new law includes health and nutrition lessons as well as physical activity led by teachers or others. It is up to districts and individual schools to figure out how to fit it into schedules. Certified physical education teachers are not required and time spent crafting menus and doing squats in a classroom count.

Elementary school students are probably more physically active in school this year because of the new law, Vanoer said, but the value is greater: "More people are aware of the importance of it."

From his statement released with the council's report, Crist is again looking for districts to figure out logistics.

"I encourage Floridians to get involved and implement the recommendations at the local level," he said.

The council was co-chaired by Tampa Bay Buccaneer Derrick Brooks.

Fitness Assessments Included In Proposal

The new recommendations call for 225 minutes a week of physical education for grades 6 through 8 by 2010, along with adequate funding and necessary changes to the curriculum or more hours in the school day. Grades 9 through 12 would be implemented by 2012.

If the money does come through to add the time for physical education classes, finding certified teachers won't be a problem, Vanoer said.

"We have excellent physical education teachers knocking on the door," he said. "Right now we're trying to figure out how to keep them."

Other recommendations from the council include:

- Provide training and incentives for teachers to teach and set examples of a healthy lifestyle
- Require an assessment of every child's fitness in public schools, including Body Mass Index, and award schools for progress

- Legislate nutritional standards of the National Academies, phasing them in for elementary schools by 2009-10, middle schools by 2010-11 and high schools by 2011-12
- Initiate a School Nutrition Report Card, expanding statewide by 2010-11
- Expand the school breakfast program to include all children in elementary through high school. Hillsborough already provides a free breakfast for all children.

Also included are promotions to build awareness.

Wellness Should Be Value, Consultant Says

With soaring national childhood obesity leading to more chronic illnesses such as childhood diabetes, the Hillsborough school district also is looking for ways to promote healthier lifestyles.

In October, the school board hired a former teacher who is now a trainer and motivational speaker as a consultant. Cindy Coney's \$54,000 contract at \$750 a day was questioned because her assignment was unclear, no other consultants were considered and the district already has three wellness committees.

So far, Coney has reviewed district programs, met with staff and surveyed principals.

She said Friday that she likes what the district has in place, especially the Coordinated School Health program at more than 70 of the district's 200 schools with teams of nurses, guidance counselors, physical education teachers and others to create and support health programs specific to their students' and staff's needs.

The district planned to expand it to all schools but funding after a federal grant runs out in a year is a concern.

The district's goals are "all FCAT things - they're all grades," Coney said, referring to the state's testing program.

Coney said the district needs to add wellness to its list of values and goals. If wellness isn't a value, the district can't strengthen its current wellness policy, she said.

"How difficult is it to get health as a value?" Coney asked rhetorically of the 10 district staff and a school board member gathered for a second meeting with her Friday. "That's been a missing link to me."

Coney assigned members of the group to work on policy, vending contracts, employee wellness and staff development, or training.

After assigning policy to Mary Kate Harrison, the district's general director of student nutrition services, Coney suggested Harrison reconvene her original 31-member community and district committee that proposed in mid-2006 what ended up being the district's current wellness policy to meet a federal mandate.

That committee's recommendations included an end to candy-sale fundraisers and sugary sodas in schools.

But Superintendent MaryEllen Elia gave the board a half-page wellness policy that encourages health programs but leaves out details or guidelines.

Elia said the committee had left out key considerations such as losing time from academics and money. The district has a 12-year, \$50 million exclusive contract with Pepsi Bottling Group, signed in 2003, that gives the district and mainly high schools hundreds of thousands of dollars in commissions.

Coney said she has concluded what her group already knew: Money, used for student and staff incentives at school, is why principals don't want to give up vending machines.

A local lawyer has volunteered to research other districts that have given up sodas in vending machines to see how they can do it financially, Coney said. Other districts nationwide, including Miami-Dade County, are going that route.

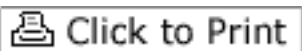
Her group meets again in February.

The full report by the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness can be found at www.healthyfloridians.org.

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