



August 29, 2017

Commissioner Mike Morath
Texas Education Agency
1701 N. Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701

Submitted via email to: essa@tea.texas.gov

Dear Commissioner Morath:

On behalf of the Partnership for a Healthy Texas, a coalition made up of more than 40 health related organizations dedicated to developing and promoting policies that prevent obesity in Texas, I am writing to respectfully request the inclusion of policies promoting physical education, health, and wellness in the Texas Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) State Plan. ESSA identifies school health and physical education as part of a student's "well rounded education," along with other subjects.

Healthy students are engaged students, and a comprehensive education program must focus on the whole child—supporting their physical, mental, and emotional health—to achieve student success. An important component of educating the whole child is the inclusion of quality physical education, physical activity, nutrition education and health. The Texas ESSA plan should:

- (1) include explicit ways for a local school district to prioritize physical education (PE), nutrition education, health, and wellness when seeking funding at the state and federal level,
- (2) empower the school districts to make changes to their curriculum and planning so all students have access to quality physical education and wellness policies that include nutrition education, and
- (3) emphasize utilization of the School Health Advisory Councils (SHACs) and the ability to pull down grant funding tied to SHAC initiatives.

Healthy habits start in childhood, and schools can play an important role in providing opportunities for physical activity and dietary intake. 44% of Texas 4th grade children already have overweight or obesity. Of those, 9% are severely obese.¹ Higher body mass index in childhood is associated with greater risks

¹ Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living. (2015-2016) School Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey. Retrieved from: <https://sph.uth.edu/research/centers/dell/project.htm?project=3037edaa-201e-492a-b42f-f0208ccf8b29>

of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and premature death.² Additionally, childhood obesity severely limits a child's quality of life and educational outcomes. Despite physical activity and healthier dietary intakes being proven strategies in combating obesity and improving educational success rates, both PE and recess have declined in Texas schools over the past decade, and more than two-thirds of Texas children get less than 20 minutes of vigorous exercise daily.³

We know active kids are better learners. Children who get the recommended amount of physical activity are consistently shown to achieve higher test scores, have better focus, maintain better behavior in the classroom, and have less absences overall.⁴ Consumption of breakfast and healthy diets are also important for better test performance and the ability to learn.⁵ Not only is it paramount to ensure our children are physically active each day, it is also critically important that they are taught the necessary life skills for healthy and active living, to help them grow into healthy, productive, and thriving adults. Just as it is important to teach our kids the fundamentals of math, reading, and language, we must also be teaching them the fundamentals of health, physical activity, and wellness. Physical Education teaches these important life skills and supports the whole child by benefitting their physical, mental, and emotional health.

ESSA encourages a stronger emphasis on the integration of health and education to create a well-rounded curriculum. The lack of inclusion of any aspects of physical education, nutrition education, health, and wellness in the Texas ESSA plan does a disservice to Texas children. Please ensure that all districts encourage quality PE and health programs and that accountability measures are incorporated in our State ESSA plan. The Partnership for a Healthy Texas stands ready to assist in working with the Texas Education Agency and local school districts to ensure these healthy habits are being instilled.

For any additional questions or comments, please contact Kaitlyn Murphy, JD, Vice-Chair of the Partnership for a Healthy Texas, at kaitlyn.murphy@heart.org or 512-338-2449.

Thank you,



David L. Lakey, MD
Chair, Partnership for a Healthy Texas
Former Commissioner, Department of State Health Services (2006-2015)

² The Health Status of Texas Report, Texas Department of State Health Services, retrieved from <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/chs/HealthStatusTexas2014.pdf>

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014). School Health Policies and Practices Study. Trends Over Time: 2000-2014. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/shpps/pdf/2014factsheets/trends_shpps2014.pdf; National Survey of Children's Health 2011-2012. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://childhealthdata.org/browse/survey/results>

⁴ Active Education: Growing Evidence on Physical Activity and Academic Performance. Active Living Research. Retrieved from <http://activelivingresearch.org/ActiveEducationBrief>

⁵ Health and Academic Achievement. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/health-academic-achievement.pdf