



# Physical Activity and Physical Education in California Schools

A survey of district/county office of education perceptions and practices

Research Brief | August 2009

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Research shows that students who participate in daily physical activity exhibit a more positive attitude towards school, better attendance and increased academic performance.<sup>1</sup> However, children are less physically active than ever before.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 40 percent of California children are not physically fit,<sup>3</sup> and the prevalence of obesity among school-age children has more than doubled for children aged 6–11 years (from 7 percent to 17 percent) and more than tripled for children aged 12–19 years (from 5 percent to 18 percent) in the past 30 years.<sup>4</sup>

Schools play an important role in influencing student physical activity behaviors and promoting cognitive learning related to lifelong participation in physical activity. They are also in a unique position to provide a safe environment for physical activity opportunities before, during and after the school day. Schools with numerous physical activity opportunities and quality physical education programs may see an increase in student concentration, a reduction in disruptive behaviors and improved academic performance.<sup>5</sup> Further, quality physical activity and P.E. programs can contribute to the prevention of obesity and chronic disease.<sup>6</sup> School boards should consider adopting, supporting and monitoring comprehensive policies and programs that strengthen opportunities for students to be physically active, healthier and more ready to learn.

This research brief summarizes key results from a confidential online survey given to California school board members on “Physical Activity and Physical Education in California Schools” developed by the California School Boards Association (CSBA) and California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) (CPL). Based on the survey results, this brief highlights actions school districts/county offices of

education (COEs) can take to support physical activity and P.E. The survey objectives were to determine existing physical activity and P.E. district/COE policies and practices, the opportunities and barriers to improving physical activity and P.E. and the perceptions of school board members regarding the impact of student physical activity.

For the purposes of the survey, physical activity is defined as bodily movement of any type. Opportunities for physical activity before, during and after the school day include:

- P.E. class
- Classroom-based movement (activity breaks and incorporating physical activity into academic lessons)
- Recess or free play
- Walking, bicycling or other active transportation to and from school
- Recreational sport and play

## METHODOLOGY

In January 2009, an online survey was sent to 2,669 California school board members with e-mail addresses. The survey yielded 339 responses for a response rate of 13 percent. The survey data included responses from districts/COEs of various sizes and income levels in every geographic region throughout California.

## KEY FINDINGS

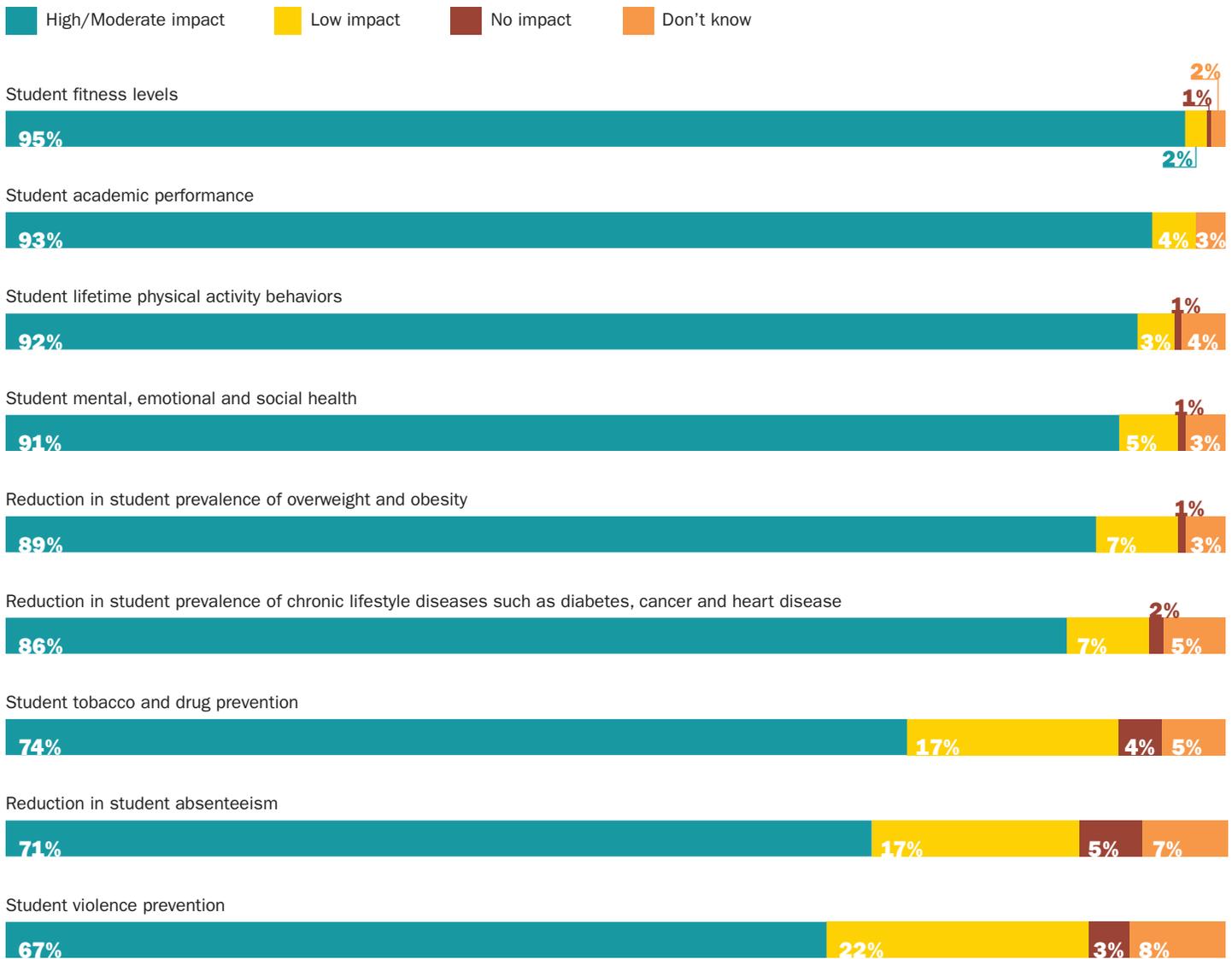
### Perceptions regarding positive impact of physical activity

School board members held a prevailing belief that physical activity positively impacts a variety of student health and academic outcomes (see Figure 1 on page 2). The majority of respondents indicated that physical activity has a positive “high impact” and



FIGURE 1

### Perceptions regarding positive impact of physical activity



“moderate impact” on student fitness levels, academic performance, lifetime physical activity behaviors and mental, emotional and social health.

#### Key school wellness issues

School board members indicated that the top four school wellness issues their district/COE was currently addressing were:

1. Food and nutrition policies or practices (84 percent)
2. Physical activity and P.E. policies or practices (70 percent)

3. Tobacco and drug prevention (69 percent)
4. Safety issues such as injury/violence prevention (59 percent)

#### District/COE monitoring of physical activity and P.E. policy implementation

School board members indicated that the top four individuals most responsible for monitoring implementation of district/COE physical activity and P.E. policies were assistant superintendents (26 percent), P.E. teachers (16 percent), principals (14 percent) and superintendents (12 percent).

### Community access to school physical activity facilities

The majority of respondents (52 percent) reported that all of the schools within their district/COE were open to the public outside of school hours for physical activity programs or free play. Another 36 percent reported that some of their schools were open to the public and less than 10 percent of respondents said that none of their schools were open to the public after school hours. Schools in higher income districts/COEs (less than 25 percent of students in the National School Lunch Program) were more likely to be open (68 percent) than schools in lower income districts/COEs (greater than 75 percent of students in the NSLP) (44 percent). The

most frequently cited reasons for not opening schools to the public after school hours were:

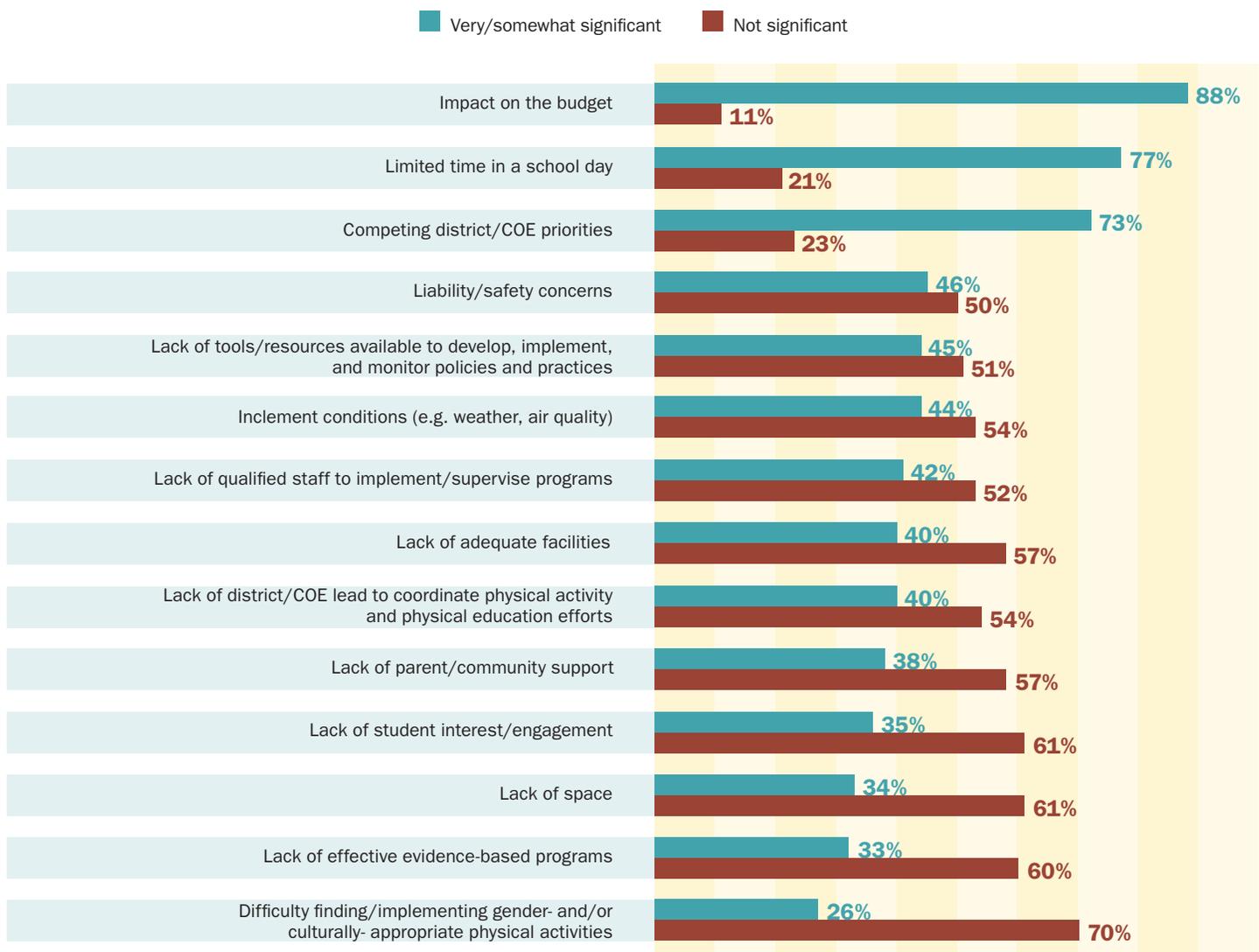
1. Safety or liability concerns (88 percent)
2. Lack of staffing (45 percent)
3. Insufficient funding (39 percent)
4. Risk of vandalism (38 percent)

### District/COE barriers and challenges in addressing physical activity and P.E.

School board members were asked to identify key barriers and challenges in addressing physical activity and P.E. at the district/COE level (see Figure 2). The three key barriers respondents identified as “very

FIGURE 2

### District/COE barriers and challenges in addressing physical activity and P.E.



significant” and “somewhat significant” were impact on the budget, limited time in a school day and competing district/COE priorities.

Additional barriers and challenges that were either “very significant” or “somewhat significant” for lower income districts/COEs were lack of parent/community support (66 percent), lack of tools/resources available to develop, implement and monitor policies and practices (60 percent), inclement weather conditions (58 percent) and lack of student interest/engagement (54 percent).

### Impacts on physical activity and P.E. in the 2007–2008 academic year

During difficult economic times, school board members indicated that in the 2007–2008 school year, physical activity and P.E. opportunities had been impacted in their district/COE. An increase in P.E. class size (26 percent), reduction in the amount of time dedicated to P.E. class (23 percent) and reduction in staff who oversee physical activity opportunities (22 percent) were the most common negative impacts. On all indicators, lower income districts reported a greater negative impact on physical activity and P.E. opportunities than higher income districts/COEs.

## ACTION STEPS FOR BOARDS

The findings from this survey suggest a number of action steps that school board members can take to effectively develop, support and monitor physical activity and P.E. programs and policies.

1. Develop an understanding among board, district/COE staff and community of the importance of physical activity and its link to student learning. (For more information visit [www.csba.org/EducationIssues/EducationIssues/Wellness/PhysicalActivity.aspx](http://www.csba.org/EducationIssues/EducationIssues/Wellness/PhysicalActivity.aspx).)
2. Adopt and align physical activity and P.E. policies to accomplish district/COE goals and objectives. (For example, see CSBA’s sample policies and administrative regulations BP 5030 – Student Wellness, BP/AR 6142.7 – Physical Education and BP/AR 5142.2 – Safe Routes to School Program.)
3. Ensure that the district/COE explores funding opportunities for improving physical activity opportunities before, during and after school. Some examples of federal and state grants include the Physical Education Program (PEP) grant, Physical Education Teacher Incentive Program (PETIP), Physical Education Teacher Incentive and Safe Routes to School infrastructure and noninfrastructure grants. (See the policy brief *Safe Routes to School: Program and Policy Strategies*, jointly issued by CSBA and CPL.)
4. Ensure the district/COE explores cost effective strategies to strengthen physical activity and P.E., such as:
  - Provide ongoing professional development opportunities to support classroom teachers and other staff.
  - Adopt policy and curriculum that promote high levels of physical activity for all students, including an expectation that all students engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity for at least 50 percent of P.E. class time.
  - Integrate physical activity into the classroom by establishing physical activity breaks during class and/or incorporating physical activity into standard academic lessons.
5. Monitor physical activity and P.E. programs to ensure that they are meeting federal, state and local requirements and the district’s/COE’s vision and goals. Schedule regular reports to the board, program partners and the public from the superintendent or designee on district/COE progress on physical activity and P.E. policy implementation.
6. Collaborate with school and community stakeholders to maximize resources and create or enhance physical activity and P.E. programs and opportunities before, during and after school, such as:
  - Establish a Safe Routes to School program by partnering with local city or county government, school staff, students, parents and parent organizations, community-based organizations and/or businesses to encourage safe walking, bicycling and other physically active forms of transportation to and from school.
  - Partner with community-based organizations, parents and students to strengthen physical activity opportunities during the school day, such as starting a walking or running club or providing structured games or supervision during recess.
  - Partner on joint use programs and/or facilities with local government or community-based organizations in order to enhance after-school physical activity programs for students.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

**California School Boards Association** is a nonprofit association consisting of nearly all of the state's 1,000 school districts and county offices of education. The member-driven organization supports the governance team—school board members, superintendents, and senior administrative staff—in its complex leadership role, offering policy services, policy analysis, advocacy, publications, continuing education, financial programs, legal services, and more. For policy briefs, publications and other resources on a variety of school wellness issues, including asthma, mental health, nutrition, obesity, oral health, physical activity and physical education, visit [www.csba.org/Wellness.aspx](http://www.csba.org/Wellness.aspx).

**California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition)** is a joint program of the California Department of Public Health and the Public Health Institute, focusing on youth and parent empowerment, policy and environmental change strategies, and community-based solutions to increase healthy eating and physical activity. CPL provides technical assistance, training, and tools on developing, implementing, and monitoring school wellness policies. [www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org](http://www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org).

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Support for this project was provided by a grant from The California Endowment.