



## PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK CITY

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### **PHANYC Statement for City Council Education Committee Public Hearing: “Oversight: Let Them Play: Access to Schoolyards Outside of School Hours” October 4, 2006**

Good morning. My name is Amy J. Schwartz, and I am the Executive Director of the Public Health Association of New York City (PHANYC), an affiliate of the American Public Health Association, the national organization of public health professionals. I'd like to thank the City Council Education Committee for holding this Oversight Hearing on making public elementary schoolyards accessible for public use outside of school hours

PHANYC, the city's largest and oldest organization of public health professionals in New York City, supports Proposed Resolution. No.134-A that calls upon the New York City Department of Education to hold open for public use, outside of school hours, playgrounds and other recreational equipment located in school yards. According to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, two in five elementary school children are overweight and among Black and Latino children the rates are even higher<sup>i</sup>. A growing body of public health evidence links childhood overweight and obesity with serious health problems in adulthood. However, according to a report of the US Surgeon General<sup>ii</sup> and other sources<sup>iii</sup>, regular physical activity improves the quality and length of life. Moving our bodies helps us keep slim and reduces our risk of heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and certain types of cancer, depression, anxiety, and sleep problems. Regular physical activity can increase students' concentration, reduce disruptive behavior, and improve academic achievement.<sup>iv</sup>

Unfortunately, NYC schools are not doing enough to provide regular opportunities for physical activity. Surveys show that about 40% of elementary and 25% of high schools do not provide regular physical education (PE) classes for all students<sup>v</sup>. Most elementary schools offer PE once, or at most, twice per week. Student-teacher ratios for elementary school PE are an estimated 730 to 1; most middle school PE classes have more than 50 students. The percent of obese children has been shown to fall dramatically when PE instruction is expanded to a minimum of 5 hours per week.<sup>vi</sup>

The proposed resolution to make playgrounds and other recreational equipment available to children and young people in New York City after school hours offers a low cost and effective action to get NYC children moving more. We encourage the City Council to pass this health promoting resolution and the Department of Education to implement it.

The resolution to make school playgrounds available after school hours is a first step in increasing opportunities for NYC school children to become more active. Other needed actions are:

#### **1. Expand opportunities for extra-curricular activities.**

Spending on athletics in NYC schools is less than 1/10<sup>th</sup> that of nearby suburbs. While 80% of elementary, middle and high schools report having after-school programs, only 17% have before-school programs, 7% have evening programs, and 11% have weekend programs. Only 1 in 3 schools offer intramurals, and barely 1 in 10 high school students have the opportunity to play on competitive teams - the lowest participation rate of any large US city.

**2. Enforce state regulations for PE and hold schools accountable for their performance.**

NY State requires that all students in K-12 must participate in a physical education program: All pupils in grades K-3 on a daily basis, grades 4-6 not less than three times per week and grades 7-12 not less than three times per week in one semester, and not less than two times per week in the other semester. Students are required to have 120 minutes of physical education per calendar week<sup>vii</sup>.

**3. Repair and upgrade school yards, playing fields, gyms and other facilities.** The Mayor and the Department of Education should use some of the \$11.2 billion in school construction aid approved by NYS in 2006 to repair school recreational facilities and halt the practice of eliminating gyms and yards to remedy overcrowding. All new schools should be built with gyms.

**4. Open school gymnasiums and playing fields to children and young adults after school hours in order to make safe, affordable places for physical activity more accessible.** The Shape Up program designed to increase physical activity and sponsored by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Department of Parks and Recreation should be offered in schools as well as in parks and recreational centers and priority should go to neighborhoods with high rates of overweight and obesity.

In the past, the New York City Department of Education has sometimes argued that education is its top priority and that its limited resources are best spent on improving student test scores. It is our belief that the wealthiest city in the United States should not have to choose between the health and education of its children. Moreover, all available evidence suggests that healthy children are better learners and that a better educated population is healthier. By taking a first step to get NYC children moving more, the City Council can help to make our children the best educated and healthiest in the nation. They deserve no less.

*END*

For more information on the Public Health Association of New York City, visit [www.phanyc.org](http://www.phanyc.org). This testimony is excerpted from an upcoming PHANYC report: **Steps to Get New Yorkers Moving: Policy Recommendations for Increasing Opportunities for Physical Activity in New York City**. To obtain a copy after it is released, please e-mail us at [info@phanyc.org](mailto:info@phanyc.org). For more information on this testimony or the report, contact Amy J. Schwartz, PHANYC Executive Director at 212-722-1063 or Nicholas Freudenberg, Distinguished Professor of Public Health, Hunter College and President PHANYC at [nfreuden@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:nfreuden@hunter.cuny.edu).

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**References**

<sup>i</sup> Thorpe L, List D, Marx T, May L, Helgerson S, Frieden T. Childhood obesity in New York City elementary school students. *Am J Public Health*. 2004;94(9):1496 .

<sup>ii</sup> CDC. *Physical activity and health: report of the Surgeon General*. Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 1996

<sup>iii</sup> Kahn EB, et al, and The Task Force on Community Preventive Services. The effectiveness of interventions to increase physical activity. *Am J Prev Med*. 2002;22(4S):87-88.

<sup>iv</sup> VanLandeghem K. Preventing Obesity in Youth through School-Based Efforts. *NGA Center for Best Practices*. February 4 2003:1-8

<sup>v</sup> Ledernan N. HIT or MISS: Fitness and Sports Opportunities in the New York City Public Schools. *Educational Frameworks, Inc*. 2000.

<sup>vi</sup> Sturm R. Childhood Obesity - Advancing Effective Prevention and Treatment. *National Institute for Health Care Management Foundation, Action Brief* [Available at:

[http://www.nihcm.org/finalweb/pg\\_publications\\_maternal.htm](http://www.nihcm.org/finalweb/pg_publications_maternal.htm)].

<sup>vii</sup> Guidelines available at <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/pe/peqa.html>