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**Testimony Before the Committee On Education
Council of the District of Columbia
Hearing on: B22-313 “Healthy Students Amendments Act of 2017”**

**Sarah Baldauf
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Milken Institute School of Public Health
The George Washington University**

November 17, 2017

Good afternoon, and thank you for this opportunity. My name is Sarah Baldauf. I am Senior Director of Communications, Outreach and Engagement at the Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health. I have been an active participant on the Healthy Youth and Schools Commission (HYSC) Subcommittee on Physical Activity, chaired by Dr. Bill Dietz, who is also Chair of the Redstone Center at the GW School of Public Health. I am a Ward 6 resident and parent to a DCPS kindergartener and a 2.5 year old in day care. In these capacities, I would like to comment specifically on the physical activity and physical education (PE) provisions in the Healthy Students Amendments Act of 2017 (HSSA). In the interest of time, I will read a shorter version of our written testimony, which includes additional recommendations for technical fixes. My comments reflect the views of the Redstone Center, not necessarily those of the George Washington University or the Milken Institute School of Public Health.

We commend Council Members Mary Cheh and Charles Allen for introducing this legislation and thank the seven Council Members who signed on as co-sponsors. The HYSC Subcommittee on Physical Activity made a number of recommendations to DC Council related to physical activity and PE in schools, the majority of which were included in the Healthy Students Amendments Act. We also commend the Council for already taking action on one of the Subcommittee’s recommendations in the most recent Budget Support Act that will help enable more equitable distribution of health and nutrition grants from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)

Physical Activity: Key to Health, Brain Function and Academic Performance

The Healthy Students Amendments Act of 2010 is an important law that established physical activity and the overall health of our District students as a city value. Through the HSSA legislation under consideration today, we have an opportunity to learn from some of the implementation challenges and gaps revealed since the Healthy Schools Act of 2010 became law; we can make smart policy that supports our DC schools – all in service to the ultimate goal: the success and wellbeing of our students.

People generally recognize the health benefits of physical activity, but it’s essential to also recognize it improves the brain development that impacts learning.

- This is best illustrated by the brains of 7 to 9 year olds who met the daily physical activity requirements – of 60 minutes per day – in a recent randomized controlled trial. This is your child’s brain on physical activity (see attached reference to

Pediatrics, Hillman et al.). They had improved aerobic fitness, but also better brain function, specifically executive control, compared to the children who did not meet daily requirements.

- Executive control underpins academic skills and social-emotional development, and supports the self-control that can reduce disruptive or aggressive behavior inside and outside the classroom.
- In addition, research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has found positive associations between physical activity and academic performance. Importantly, increasing time during school for physical activity and PE class has not been found to negatively impact academic performance by decreasing academic instruction time, for example.
 - We see this positive association between physical activity and academics in local data as well. The DC 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) showed that more than one third of high school students who reported getting mostly A's or mostly B's got at least 60 minutes of physical activity a day on five or more days of the previous week. Of those who reported getting mostly D's and F's, about one in five (22 percent) got that level of physical activity.

Opportunity: Learn from Implementation Challenges, Work to Fill Critical Gaps

The Healthy Youth and Schools Subcommittee on Physical Activity has met regularly over nearly two years, with active participation from a range of stakeholders, including from DC Public Schools (DCPS), the Office of the State Superintendent for Schools (OSSE), the DC Department of Health, schools, educators, the American Heart Association, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, Playworks, BOKs, and other local youth-serving organizations.

Our work on the PA Subcommittee has provided several critical insights about the impact of the Healthy Schools Act and where it can be strengthened:

- DC data shows that the majority of our schools are not meeting the PE requirements set by the 2010 law (elementary schools: 150 minutes / week, middle schools: 225 minutes / week), which are consistent with national recommendations for PE from SHAPE America (the Society of Health and Physical Educators), the gold standard for guidelines for health and PE.
- **Under current DC law, there are *no physical activity standards for our youngest students: 3- and 4-year olds in Pre-Kindergarten.*** While the Healthy Schools Act of 2010 set PE requirements for students in kindergarten and older grades, the law is silent on PreK 3 & 4. As a result, our 3 & 4 year olds receive inconsistent, often insufficient, delivery of physical activity in the school setting and we don't have data on what schools provide to our youngest students.
 - I have seen this with my own children. Two years ago, my then-PreK 3 year old in a DCPS elementary school got only 20 minutes of daily recess during the 6.5 hour school day, and a 45-minute PE class once per week. As a parent and someone in public health, this was highly distressing. I'm pleased to say that after a fair amount of work and conversation between parents, administration and staff, my daughter's school shifted to scheduling 40 minutes of recess per day for PreK students. But it should not be the policy of the District that parents need to fight for their children to get the amount of physical activity we know young students need for healthy physical and cognitive development.

- Early childhood education guidelines show us the critical importance of opportunities for physical activity for 3 and 4 year olds. Providing them the time and space to run, jump, climb and play outdoors not only builds important motor skills and offers a break from more sedentary learning in the classroom, it supports essential social-emotional skills that are the building blocks to learning and self-control, which, in turn, promotes not only their individual success, it helps assure a smoothly running classroom.
- Physical activity is essential for our youngest students, but it does not require the expertise of – or instruction from – PE teachers. Anyone who’s spent time with a PreK 3 or 4 year old will quickly see that they readily run, jump and climb – getting important moderate- to vigorous- physical activity – if they are simply given the chance. **This is a key insight: If schools provide PreK students the appropriate time for recess, say, instead of PE classes, PE teachers can provide more classes to the older students, who actually benefit from such age-appropriate PE instruction.**

All of these observations culminated in the Subcommittee’s recommendations for improvements to the 2010 law, which have been included in the proposed legislation:

- (1) Set an age-appropriate standard for PreK physical activity of a minimum 60 minutes daily and a goal of 90 minutes with at least 40 minutes outdoors (as appropriate), say, for recess. This standard aligns with the recommendation from Caring for our Children, considered the gold standard in guidelines for early childhood education.
- (2) Shift the current number of PE minutes in kindergarten and older grades from a mandate to a “goal,” while also setting a minimum weekly requirement of minutes, or “floor.”
- (3) Create a non-punitive mechanism to help schools not meeting the floor to develop an action plan and receive supports to increase physical activity. These schools would work with OSSE to devise strategies for removing the barriers to PE and physical activity at their school.
- (4) Require OSSE to provide and coordinate professional development for classroom teachers and staff to learn how to incorporate daily physical activity through “brain boosts,” and other activities that can keep students active throughout the day.

Recess for All

One provision recommended by the Subcommittee that was not included in this legislation is a daily recess standard for all students. Specifically, “at least one recess of at least 20 minutes on a daily basis,” which is consistent with national guidelines. The American Academy of Pediatrics has found that “[r]ecess is a necessary break in the day for optimizing a child’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development.” We urge the committee to incorporate a recess standard in the final legislation. The Redstone Center has provided suggested language to committee staff.

Additional Recommendations

Although the current legislation would significantly enhance the Healthy Schools Act, we recommend considering several changes to the legislation as currently written. The Redstone Center has provided recommended language changes to Committee staff as well as the offices of Council Members Cheh and Allen and we are happy to continue to offer our assistance as the legislative process continues. Recommendations include the following:

- (1) Adjust the weekly “floor” for PE minutes to align with the way schools make their schedules. Typical schedules have 45-minute classes. Changing the minimum from 100 minutes to 90 for kindergarten – 5th grade and from 150 minutes to 135 for 6th – 8th grade can ease implementation.
- (2) Strike “gardening” from the bill language listing examples of physical activity for young students. While we support the educational value of the many school garden programs in the District, gardening does not confer the same health benefits as soccer and other team sports, jumping rope, or running and climbing during recess, for example.
- (3) Clarify that using physical activity as a reward for achievement or good behavior means physical activity above the required amount of time for all students
- (4) Include a minimum recess requirement for students in K-8 and ensure failure to meet the recess provisions are included in the action plan.
- (5) Strengthen the action plan requirements for schools not meeting the physical education or recess provisions and clarify that the action plan should detail how they will meet the provisions during the subsequent school year.
- (6) Strengthen the language around recess for Pre-K 3 and 4 to clarify that the desired moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) for this age group is best achieved through outdoor recess (allowing running, climbing, jumping, etc. to achieve MVPA) and that this amount of daily physical activity time should be available even during inclement weather. The recommended language is based on Caring for our Children, National Health and Safety Performance Standards, Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs (See <http://cfoc.nrckids.org/StandardView/3.1.3.1>), the premier guideline for ECE used by OSSE, DCPS, etc.
- (7) Ensure the language for all of the actions plans throughout the bill is consistent and includes the timing of the action plan.
- (8) The action plan for schools not meeting the physical education requirements for students in kindergarten and older should be applied to schools with Pre-K 3 and 4 students to ensure these schools have a plan in place to meet the requirements.
- (9) Ensure that budgetary resources related to physical activity and recess, including funding for equipment, are not re-programmed for other expenses.
- (10) Include language in the central kitchen report that expressly requires consideration of how a central kitchen facility could positively impact training, employment and economic opportunities for district residents, especially disconnected youth and returning citizens. Also, ensure that OSSE will consult with other appropriate District agencies (e.g. DGS, Department of Employment Services) and non-governmental experts whose input would be beneficial.
- (11) Ensure OSSE has resources to deliver meaningful technical assistance to schools that identify barriers to implementing physical activity and PE.

Broad Investment in Children’s Health and Wellbeing

As we consider policies to support the physical, educational, and mental wellbeing of our District students, we must recognize that no one law or single system can support healthy child development on its own. We – as adults, parents, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers – must develop a coordinated approach to multiple District processes and systems to ensure all DC students grow up supported to become healthy, productive members of our community.

In the case of removing barriers to student physical activity and implementation of PE classes, we should recognize now that space constraints may prevent some schools from

meeting the proposed requirements. The school modernization process offers an opportunity to remove those barriers – including the use of school rooftops for physical activity and play spaces. Another barrier for some schools may be limited funding for an additional half- or full-time PE teacher needed to meet scheduling requirements. This may require ensuring that during the budget process, schools have sufficient funds to hire enough quality PE teachers.

On behalf of the Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness at the GW School of Public Health – and as a District parent of young children – thank you for considering this legislation and working to move it forward. Thank you also for considering our additional recommendations. Our students, their health, and their academic outcomes stand to benefit significantly.

Reference: Physical Activity and Brain Function in Children

A recent randomized controlled trial in *Pediatrics* showed that 7 to 9 year olds who met the daily physical activity requirements – 60 minutes or more per day – not only improved aerobic fitness, but also showed better brain function and cognitive performance, specifically executive control, compared to the children who did not. A visual of the effect of physical activity on executive brain function can be seen in the *Pediatrics* paper, Hillman et al. (below). Executive control underpins academic skills and social-emotional development, and supports the self-control that can reduce disruptive or aggressive behavior inside and outside the classroom.

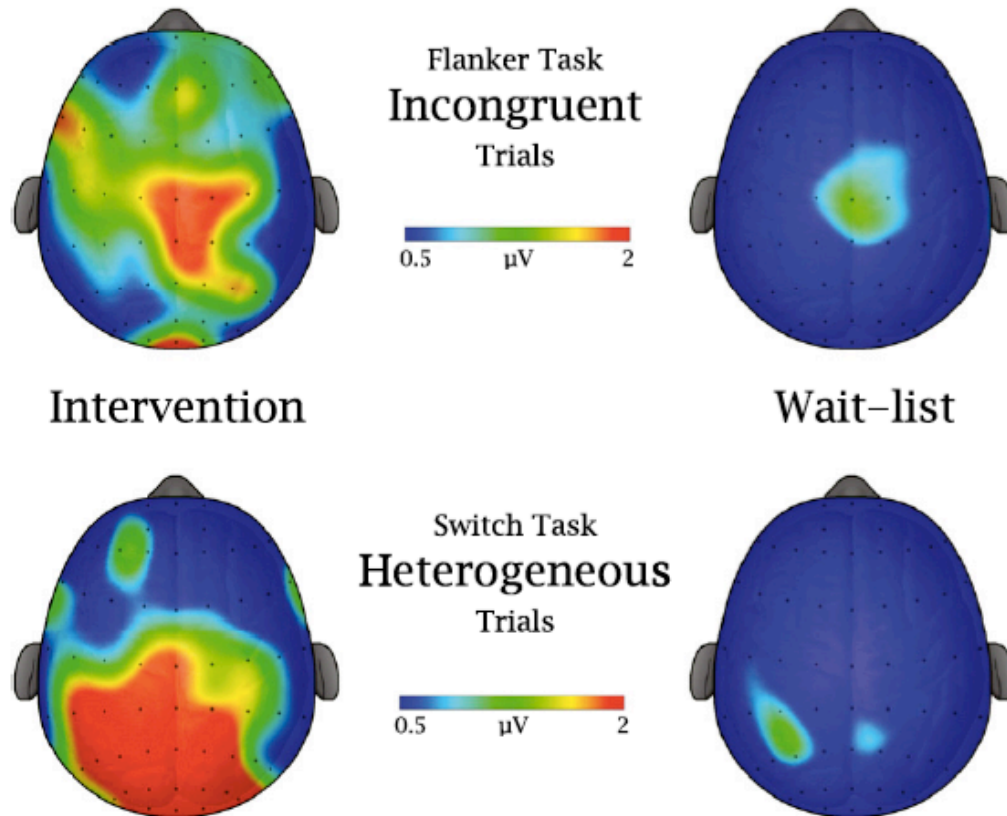


FIGURE 3

Topographic scalp distribution of the change in P3 amplitude (spectrum scale: blue to red) during the flanker task (top) and switch task (bottom) is illustrated for the intervention group (left) and wait-list group (right). As shown, P3 amplitude was greater in the intervention group at posttest only for the conditions that required the greatest amount of executive control across both tasks as denoted by the greater amount of red depicted in the electrophysiological plots representing brain function.

From *Pediatrics*: www.pediatrics.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2013-3219