

## Physical education in schools

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A European Parliament report published earlier this month revealed how the number of children not doing sports is constantly rising across the EU with computers and video games taking the blame.

The issue appears even more serious when one considers the increase in child obesity.

The report entitled Current situation and prospects for physical education in the EU, was drawn up by Professor Ken Hardman and was presented during a public hearing on the role of sport in education at the end of February. It analyses the allocation of time for physical education (PE in the European school curriculum, the status of PE, curriculum thematic aims and content, resources and gender, disability and ethnic-minority issues.

In his report, Professor Hardman reveals that current national practices vary widely from one Member State to another, with some paying more attention to sports than others. The report also makes reference to the large differences in the number and quality of sports facilities between schools in eastern and western European countries.

In Malta too, many are becoming increasingly concerned at the lack of physical activity by children, as Malta has even surpassed the United States in terms of obesity. In fact, 13.5% of boys and 17% of girls are considered to be obese. Some months ago, Minister Louis Galea had publicly expressed his concern at these statistics, pointing out that 90% of students do not participate in sport activities after school hours. On that occasion, Malta's Education Minister went on to say that sport facilities in schools are not being utilized other than by students during their schooling time and one fourth of the students in both primary and secondary schools are physically inactive. This is far less than the World Health Organisation's recommendation of at least an hour of physical activity every day.

Despite the fact that the EU has no specific competence in the field of sport, Article III-182 of the now on-hold European Constitution states that the EU shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging co-operation between Member States and eventually by supporting and complementing their actions.

Hardman's report includes three main policy recommendations namely compulsory physical education in schools, the modernization of the PE curriculum and the adoption of a minimum of two hours' PE per week with the aim of increasing it to three hours in the longer term.

An upcoming Commission White Paper on Sport – expected to be published in July 2007 - is also supposed to address the time allocated to PE in school curricula, the quality of education and ways to exchange best practice at EU level.

Malta's bold targets in this regard are that by 2010, 75% of children aged between five and 16 will be doing two hours of physical activity every week. This should increase to three hours and to 100% by 2015.

This achievement however surely requires the support of parents, many of whom still do not see the importance of sports, considering it instead as a waste of time and therefore instructing their children to stay away from it.

It is a real pity that the multi-faceted benefits of engaging in physical activity are not appreciated by everybody.