**Issue:** Nearly 35 percent of Tennessee adults are considered obese, which ranks it sixth in the U.S., according to a national study released in August 2017. Up 21 percent since 2000, the obesity rate also brings many related health issues, including diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, heart disease, and obesity-related cancer.

But there is evidence that things may be changing for the better: Obesity rates among students in grades K, 2, 4, 6, 8, and high school have declined 6.3 percent since the early 2000s. Partial credit may be given to the Tennessee Department of Education’s Office of Coordinated Student Health (CSH), which was established in 2001 to improve students’ health and capacity to learn.

Bolstered by state funding and a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), all Tennessee public schools have implemented CSH measures since 2007-08, one of which is the requirement that schools provide 90 minutes per week of physical activity time. Since CSH’s implementation, 289 schools have set up in-school fitness rooms; 331 schools have new or updated playgrounds; and 467 schools have developed walking tracks or trails.

**The Big Idea:** A few Tennessee school districts have chosen to go well beyond the CSH requirements. Such is the case with the Franklin Special School District, whose 504-student Moore Elementary School has historically chosen to make physical education a priority. Since 1979, the school district has included daily PE classes in its curriculum in K-4, says PE teacher Kathy Clark, SHAPE America member and one of three full-time, certified PE teachers at Moore Elementary School.

Clark and another current PE teacher have taught at Moore Elementary since it opened. She believes their longevity lends a stability that has created a culture of appreciation and expectation for effective PE among students, parents and staff. Although the PE program only has a $600-a-year budget, extra funding always seems to be available for special projects.

“We are able to get what we need, no matter how big the dream,” says Clark. “It just takes a while sometimes. We use the American Heart Association’s Jump Rope For Heart resources, apply for grants, or utilize school fundraisers.”

When Moore was built, there was no designated space for physical education classes — just a multipurpose room that proved inadequate for the type of program the PE teachers envisioned. “We used the ‘commons’ area outside the classrooms,” says Clark. “Nineteen years later, we finally got the gym we had asked for.”

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**SHAPE America** – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, Let’s Move! Active Schools (now Active Schools) and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.

shapeamerica.org
Implementation: Despite having no gym for nearly two decades, Moore Elementary still managed to create a daily PE program, restrict class size to 20 or fewer students, and make optimal use of outdoor space.

At Moore, physical education starts in kindergarten with an innovative brain development and stimulation program called readyK, developed by the school’s PE, art, library and music staff.

“The readyK program builds a strong foundation for moving and learning that continues throughout fourth grade,” says Clark. The daily, 30-minute PE program for grades 1-4 includes a progressive and sequential curriculum that meets state and national standards.

“Our students don’t receive grades on their report cards for PE,” Clark says. “We assess and report to parents their kids’ fitness with FitnessGram every fall and spring.” Not having grades doesn’t mean students aren’t motivated, she adds. “Most parents know that their kids’ favorite part of the day is going to the gym.”

With a staff of three full-time PE teachers, the school is able to offer several before- and after-school fitness programs, including walking and running clubs and jump rope club. For the past 25 years, fourth-graders also have participated in the readyK program.

Participants walk 18 hilly miles the first day, accompanied on highway stretches by a deputy sheriff escort. They stop at 5 p.m. and spend the night in the school gym, rising early to complete the final 10 miles by 1:30 p.m. the following day, when a bus returns them to school.

“It’s a huge accomplishment that is life-changing,” Clark says. She’s helped train students who are obese and students who have disabilities that require a wheelchair. “Very few students are disinherited in the walk,” she says. “I’ve had one or two kids who opted out because they were morbidly obese. The kids learn that nobody is going to bring them back — they have to finish the walk themselves.”

Results: One former student’s testimonial illustrates the impact of the 28-mile walk:

“The experience shaped the person I am today, because I was able to conquer a challenge that in my young mind seemed near impossible,” wrote one student years later as a senior in high school.

“It really drove home the concept that ‘I can do anything I put my mind to,’ and I have continued to strive to do so ever since, both in academics and outside the classroom. I honestly believe that there is no mental wall that I cannot scale. Not only that, but the friendships and bonds I made with the people I walked with are still standing strong today.”

Takeaway: Now in her 40th year of teaching, Clark has witnessed the health improvements and growth that daily physical education can foster. “When you have only one or two days of PE a week, you can’t begin to accomplish what you can when you see your students every day. It is the greatest determining factor in our effectiveness.” She says that having three full-time PE teachers with varying interests and expertise helps them keep the program fresh and fun for students.

“We are constantly evaluating our program and seeking to improve what we teach and how we teach,” she notes.

The programs implemented at Moore Elementary School may not be enough to reverse the adult obesity rate throughout Tennessee, but the school’s online FitnessGram results show that progress is being made — and that students are learning from a young age that fitness is both fun and rewarding.