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Sports Participation and Physical Education in American Secondary Schools: Current Levels of Racial/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Disparities

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Research Highlight

POLICY PERSPECTIVE

REQUIRING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN SCHOOLS IS CRITICAL TO REVERSING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY CRISIS. THIS RESEARCH, HOWEVER, SHOWS THAT PHYSICAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS DECREASE DRAMATICALLY DURING STUDENTS' SECONDARY SCHOOL YEARS. MOREOVER, THERE ARE DISPARITIES IN SCHOOL-BASED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: SECONDARY SCHOOLS WITH HIGHER PROPORTIONS OF STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME AND MINORITY POPULATIONS REPORT THE LEAST AMOUNT OF REQUIRED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY. THIS FINDING IS PARTICULARLY ALARMING GIVEN THAT THE PREVALENCE OF CHILDHOOD OBESITY IS HIGHEST IN THESE POPULATIONS.

Background

Childhood obesity is an urgent public health threat that affects nearly 25 million children and adolescents in the U.S.,¹ with minority populations and low-income communities facing the greatest risk. School policies and programs that provide opportunities for students to engage in regular physical activity, such as physical education (PE) classes and intramural or extracurricular sports, are critical to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic. In fact, research on Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 shows that legislation can increase physical activity and positively affect body mass index and weight composition.² Despite that evidence, school PE requirements have been reduced or eliminated in response to education budget cuts and increased emphasis on meeting federal academic standards.

In the study “Sports Participation and Physical Education in American Secondary Schools: Current Levels and Racial/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Disparities,”³ Lloyd D. Johnston, Jorge Delva and Patrick M. O’Malley use data from the Monitoring the Future⁴ and Youth, Education, and Society⁵ surveys to examine physical activity patterns among American children in school. They also examine possible differences in activity level by gender, grade-level, racial/ethnic background and socioeconomic status (SES).

Key Findings

- **There are significant differences in PE requirements and school-based physical activity among American students based on grade-level, ethnicity and SES.** For example, 87 percent of 8th grade students attend schools that require PE, while only 20 percent of 12th grade students have PE requirements. There is also a corresponding drop in the mean percent of students who participate in PE—more than 90 percent of 8th grade students actually take PE, compared with only 34 percent of 12th grade students. With respect to ethnicity, a significantly lower percentage of Hispanic students (75.9%) than white students (89.3%) attend schools that require PE for 8th graders. In addition, Hispanic students are less likely to attend PE classes than are white students. Research also shows that students of lower SES are less likely to have PE required in their schools, and less likely to attend those classes. The authors cite budget limitations and increased pressure to meet academic standards as possible reasons schools have reduced PE requirements and suggest that the reduction in requirement results in fewer students actually participating in PE.

1 National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Obesity Still a Major Problem,” Press Release, 14 April 2006, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/>

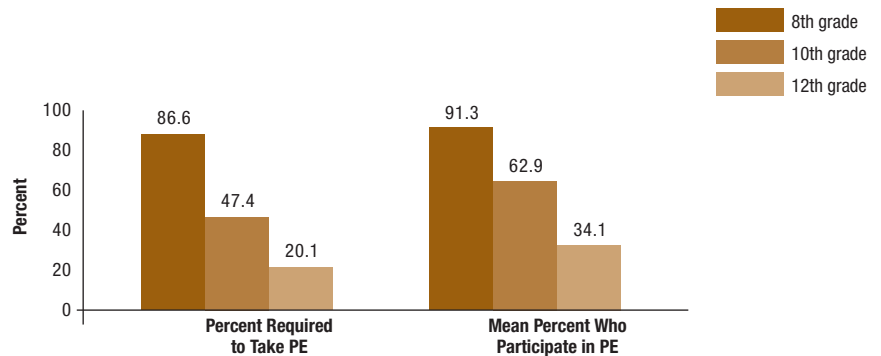
2 Kaestner R and Xu X. “Effects of Title IX and Sports Participation on Girls’ Physical Activity and Weight.” *Advances in Health Economics and Health Services Research*, 2007.

3 Johnston LD, Delva J and O’Malley PM. “Sports Participation and Physical Education in American Secondary Schools: Current Levels and Racial/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Disparities,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 33 (4) Supplement: S195-S208, October 2007. This article is available at: <http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=22273>

4 The Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey provides data on a nationally representative sample of 8th, 10th and 12th graders. The survey instrument provides information about gender, racial/ethnic background and parental education.

5 The Youth Education and Society survey sampled schools based on MTF participation and asked school administrators or other knowledgeable staff to report on participation in PE classes, varsity sports, intramural sports and walking or bicycling to school.

Percent of Students Who Are Required to and Who Participate in Physical Education (PE) by Grade Level



- **Overall participation in varsity sports and intramurals is low. While there are no differences in participation in varsity sports by grade level, there is a decline in the number of students who participate in intramural sports between middle and high school.** Rates of varsity sports participation are higher in schools attended by white students than in schools attended by African-American and Hispanic students. No ethnic differences were seen in intramural sports participation. Students are more likely to attend schools where more students participate in varsity and intramural sports, possibly due to the fact that equipment, personnel and facilities are more accessible to students of high SES.
- **Overall, few students walk or bike to school (13.7%) and the proportion of students who walk or bike to school declines as students go from middle school (20%) to high school (7%).** The percentage of students who walk or bike to school is higher in schools attended by African-American and Hispanic students than in those attended by white students. Students of low SES are more likely to walk or bike to school than higher SES students.
- **Only 47 percent of students attend schools that provide physical fitness testing and 26 percent attend schools that provide those results to parents.** There is a significant decline in both schools that provide physical fitness testing and the results of that testing to parents as grade level increases. There are no significant racial/ethnic or SES differences in schools that provide physical fitness testing or results.

—Deanna Lewis

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