

Continued Efforts are Needed to Increase Elementary School Students' Physical Activity Opportunities during the School Day

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bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices
for Healthy Youth

Background

In 2013, the US Institute of Medicine¹ emphasized the importance of physical activity (PA) and physical education (PE) in schools, and recommended a whole-of-school approach to meeting national recommendations that children obtain 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), half of which should occur during school hours. Several national organizations²⁻⁴ recommend that elementary schools adopt a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program that includes quality PE (of at least 150 minutes duration per week), as well as other opportunities for activity before, during, and after the school day, such as recess for at least 20 minutes each day, and brief classroom-based movement breaks.

Quantification of the amount of activity obtained through such strategies⁵ suggest that students' daily MVPA can be increased through PE class (23 minutes); classroom activity breaks (19 minutes); and traditional or enhanced recess (7-12 minutes), among other strategies.

Objectives

We used survey data from the Bridging the Gap research program—which conducts ongoing surveillance of health-related practices in elementary schools—to examine the prevalence of three types of PA opportunities: PE class, recess, and classroom activity breaks. These strategies were examined separately, and also in combination.

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Methods

Surveys were gathered during the spring (second-half) of the 2011-12 school year; most were completed by school administrative staff. A total of 553 public schools and 270 private schools participated (total response rate = 57.7%). Respondents were offered a modest (\$100) incentive for completing the survey, which contained items pertaining to school meals, competitive foods, physical activity, and implementation of district wellness policies. Due to variability by grade in scheduling of PE and recess, these items were anchored specifically to third-grade students. The data were weighted to provide inference to elementary schools nationwide.

Table 1: Percentage of schools with each PE/PA practice, 2011-12

	Public Schools	Private Schools
PE class daily	20.5	11.3
150 minutes/week of PE	19.7	13.8
60 minutes/week of PE	77.0	72.0
20 minutes of recess daily	72.9	79.6
Classroom activity breaks	30.3	21.0
Daily PE <i>or</i> daily recess	83.5	83.0
Daily PE <i>and</i> daily recess	14.2	8.2
150 minutes/week of PE <i>and</i> daily recess	12.0	9.8
60 minutes/week of PE <i>and</i> daily recess	56.8	56.4
60 minutes/week of PE <i>and</i> activity breaks	23.5	13.8
Daily recess <i>and</i> activity breaks	24.7	16.3
60 minutes/week of PE <i>and</i> daily recess <i>and</i> activity breaks	16.8	11.3

Results

Although a majority of schools provided students with at least some PE (60 minutes/week), fewer than one in four schools offered PE daily or for the recommended 150 minutes per week. A majority of schools provided students with daily recess; however, only half offered daily recess and a minimal amount of PE (60 minutes/week). Recommendations for both daily recess and PE (150 minutes/week) were met by fewer than one in seven public schools, and by fewer than one in twelve private schools. Classroom-based activity breaks were relatively rare, and very few schools offered PE, recess, and activity breaks.

Conclusions

Continued efforts are needed to increase PA programming in elementary schools, particularly in private schools. Although most public and private elementary schools offer daily recess, very few schools provide students with daily PE or activity breaks in the classroom. When considered in combination, very few schools provide the comprehensive array of programs that are needed for a PA-promoting school environment. Over 80% of schools offered either PE or recess daily; however, although PE and recess both provide opportunities for students to be physically active, they meet different learning and developmental needs for students. These two strategies must be considered separately, and both must be provided in elementary schools. Classroom activity breaks were relatively rare, and technical assistance and broader dissemination of PA break curricula may be needed to increase implementation.

References

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