

# Policies and Opportunities for Physical Activity in Middle Schools

## What Was the Question?

Various interventions have been proposed to increase children's participation in physical activity. Many of these involve school-based initiatives and include such things as (1) establishing policies that promote physical activity; (2) providing environments that encourage safe and enjoyable physical activity; (3) implementing quality, daily physical activity instruction and curricula; (4) offering health education that provides students with knowledge and needed behavioral skills; (5) offering sufficient training for personnel involved in physical activity instruction or promotion; and (6) developing inclusive extracurricular approaches that meet the needs and interests of all students. Before implementing any such interventions, however, it would be wise to find out a school's current level of support for physical activity. This is what Young et al. (2007) attempted to do for schools participating in the Trial of Activity for Adolescent Girls (TAAG).

## What Was Done?

School principals, department heads for physical education and health, and leaders of school-based physical activity programs from 36 schools participating in TAAG were interviewed to ascertain the level of support for

physical activity in their schools. Instructional practices and policies of the intervention schools were examined. Based on these data, schools were assigned a physical activity support score. Barriers that inhibit the effectiveness of physical activity programs were also reported.

## What Was Found?

None of the 36 schools participating in the study received a perfect score for support of physical activity. The mean score was 6.7 out of 10. The authors reported that across the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, 75 percent, 86 percent, and 78 percent of schools, respectively, included information on physical activity and fitness topics in their health education curriculum. The average yearly exposure to physical education class was approximately 110 hours in each grade. Schools in California had the highest exposure at 156 hours, and schools in South Carolina had the lowest with 50 hours. A majority of the schools also offered after-school activity programs. Eighty-three percent had interscholastic sports, and 69 percent offered intramural sports. Active transportation to and from school was generally supported, but only 21 percent of students, on average, elected to walk or ride a bicycle to school.

## What Does the Study Mean?

While this study shows that schools in the TAGG cohort generally had policies and practices that supported physical activity for their students, the data also suggested that some issues needed to be addressed. For example, despite many opportunities to engage in after-school

physical activity programs, only about five percent of girls participated in them. There was also an inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and support for those participating in physical activity. Other less favorable findings included the failure to treat physical education as a priority, as evidenced by minimal requirements, large class sizes, a lack of funding, inadequate facilities, a lack of training of personnel, and frequent cancellation of classes.

It was also reported that barriers existed for promoting greater active transportation to and from school. These included traffic, distance from home, weather, student safety, and the lack of a secure place to lock up bicycles. However, when these barriers were overcome, students were six times as likely to walk or bike to school. Best practices identified in the study included requiring daily physical education, providing transportation for students attending after-school programs, and making school facilities more accessible during after-school hours.

## Reference

Young, D., Felton, G., Grieser, M., Elder, J., Johnson, C., Lee, J., et al. (2007). Policies and opportunities for physical activity in middle school environments. *Journal of School Health, 77*(1), 41-47.

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### Submissions Welcome!

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