

Participation in Sports and Physical Education in American Secondary Schools

What Was the Question?

Johnson, Delva, and O'Malley (2007) conducted a study that aimed to determine the levels of physical education and school-based sports participation of American secondary students and to examine the influence of grade level, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status on these participation levels.

What Was Done?

Data were collected between 2003 and 2005 from more than 500 schools nationwide. School administrators completed questionnaires as part of the Youth, Education, and Society study on physical activity, physical education participation and requirements, and sports participation in their school. Over 54,000 students in those same schools completed questionnaires as part of the Monitoring the Future study, regarding their gender, racial self-identification, and their parents' educational level, which was used as a proxy of socioeconomic status (SES). The data, which were analyzed in 2006, were collected from students in grades eight, 10, and 12.

What Was Found?

Almost all (91%) eighth graders take physical education, compared to only one-third (34%) of high school seniors. Lower SES was associated with lower rates of physical education participation. Varsity sport participation remained consistent across grade levels, with impressively similar participation levels among girls (33.7%) and boys (37.4%). Lower-SES students who are most at risk for overweight and obesity attend schools with the lowest rates of varsity sports participation. In-

tramural activity also declined between eighth and 12th grade, from 24 percent to 16 percent for boys, and from 21 percent to 13 percent for girls. As with varsity sports, SES and participation in intramural sports had a positive linear relationship. The proportion of students who walk or ride a bicycle to school is low at best (20% in eighth grade), and it decreases significantly with each grade level (7% by 12th grade). One positive finding, however, was the higher percentage of Hispanic and African American students who walk or bike to school. While not surprising, it is clear that getting to and from school is no longer a source of consistent physical activity for a majority of secondary students.

The number of schools that administered physical fitness tests also declined from 64 percent in eighth grade to 25 percent in 12th grade. The levels of fitness testing reported (47% in eighth grade, 24% in 12th grade) showed the same trend across grades as the proportion of students taking physical education. This is significant, since fitness testing is typically conducted in the context of physical education classes.

What Does the Study Mean?

As evident in the results of this study, physical education is taking a back seat to other academic classes in secondary schools, particularly in schools with larger proportions of lower-SES students. This aversion to educating the whole child may be a contributing factor to the obesity epidemic in the United States today. One bright spot in these data is the finding that Title IX seems to be appropriately creating equity among the genders for participa-

tion in varsity sports. Conversely, lower-SES students get less exercise from varsity sports, physical education, and intramural sports.

Resource availability and the equitable distribution of said resources will be an important issue in addressing the childhood obesity epidemic. As suggested by the authors, this issue can most reasonably be addressed by local policymakers. The responsibility for taking these actions was concisely summarized by the authors: "Particular attention should be paid to factors that can help increase participation by black and Hispanic students, and students of lower SES, because they represent populations with higher-than-average risk for overweight and the associated medical complications" (p. S206).

Reference

Johnston, L. D., Delva, J., & O'Malley, P. (2007). Sports participation and physical education in American secondary schools: Current levels and racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 33(4S), S195-S208.

—Abstracted by Chris Morehart, health and exercise science major, The College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ.

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