

# Physical Activity, Obesity, and the Academic Achievement Gap in Minority Children

## What Was the Question?

Two of the most serious issues faced by society today are the obesity epidemic affecting youths and the academic achievement gap that exists between African American and Hispanic students compared to white and Asian American students. To address the latter problem, Congress implemented No Child Left Behind (NCLB), an effort to focus in-school and after-school programming on basic literacy skills. Unfortunately, pressures to meet standards have inadvertently resulted in the reduction in physical activity time and structured physical education programs for many children. Consequently, NCLB may have unintentionally neutralized a potential asset in the battle against childhood obesity. Also, despite NCLB, the academic achievement gap appears to be fairly resistant to being reduced. To assess the possible benefit of physical education in addressing childhood obesity and the achievement gap, Burton and VanHeest (2007) examined the interrelatedness of physical activity, obesity, and academic achievement among minority children.

## What Was Done?

The authors reviewed a selection of recent studies on obesity, academic achievement, and physical activity. They then collated the information and reported on a number of important relationships.

## What Was Found?

Overall, the studies reviewed found that many children, especially from minority populations, do not engage in the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity per day. This lack of activity conceivably contributes to overweight and obesity, especially in minority children to whom

NCLB is primarily directed. For example, 20 percent of non-Hispanic black children and 19 percent of Hispanic children are classified as overweight, whereas 16 percent of white children are identified as overweight. The review also reported that minority children have less access to recreational facilities, which in turn leads to lower involvement in physical activity. It was noted that adolescents who have access to physical activity facilities are 32 percent less likely to be overweight. Minority children were also found to spend more time watching television and movies and playing video games. These types of activities have been linked to decreased physical activity and an increase in obesity.

The current literature also states that there is—and continues to be—a significant achievement gap in literacy between non-Hispanic white children and non-Hispanic black and Hispanic children. Several factors were found to be associated with this gap, including poverty, race, and their correlates. As well, NCLB has had a wider impact on underserved communities, with 54 percent of the schools identified as needing improvement being located in urban areas. The pressure on teachers and administrators of underperforming schools to meet NCLB standards has resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum, which entails a reduction of curricular offerings to provide more time for reading, mathematics, and science. As a result, many school districts have reduced physical education and recess opportunities for students (e.g., in 1991, 42 percent of children had daily physical education, but by 2003 only 28 percent had it). The end result for students in low-income schools (which tend to have high minority populations) is that they are exposed to fewer

subject areas throughout their school years, and have fewer opportunities for physical activity during the school day.

Finally, the authors reviewed studies linking physical activity to cognitive functioning and academic achievement. While alluding to evidence that suggests positive relationships between physical activity and academic achievement, they acknowledged that additional research is needed to determine causality. Nonetheless, the authors noted that increasing physical education and physical activity levels would appear to be a part of the solution to the obesity and academic achievement disparities.

## What Does the Study Mean?

This review has some important implications. First, it is clear that there is a significant and positive link between physical activity and weight control. Also, there seems to be a connection between physical activity and cognitive functioning, and between physical fitness and academic achievement. Seemingly, arguments could be made to support physical education in the schools as part of the solution to each of the problems. The authors stated, "There are no simple solutions, but narrowing the curriculum and reducing opportunities for children to engage in physical activity are counterproductive approaches to addressing these issues."

## Reference

Burton, L. J., & VanHeest, J. L. (2007).

The importance of physical activity in closing the achievement gap. *Quest*, 59, 212-218.

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