

Study shows elementary and middle schools can get students moving, not just thinking

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Despite widespread cuts to physical education classes and recess, an Indiana University study has shown that schools can play an important role in helping their students live healthier lives. Schools that implemented coordinated school health programs saw increases in students' physical activity.

"With support from teachers, administrators and parents, our schools can become healthier places," said Mindy Hightower King, evaluation manager at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at IU Bloomington. "Despite [budget cuts](#) and increasing emphasis on academic skills, schools are choosing to focus on improving student health, which ultimately can support improved academic performance."

The findings involved 1,100 students from eight southern Indiana elementary and middle schools. Students who attended the schools that most thoroughly implemented HEROES, a program based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's coordinated school health model, were more likely to increase their physical activity levels. HEROES is designed to enhance schoolwide wellness through changes in physical education, nutrition, health promotion efforts for school staff and family, and community involvement.

"Schools that showed higher levels of program implementation had more students increase their physical activity," King said. "In addition, vigorous physical activity, defined as activity that raises heart rate and breathing, increased more in girls than in boys. This latter finding is

especially important, as past research has shown that boys of this age typically engage in more [vigorous physical activity](#) than girls."

The findings are appearing online in the journal *Preventive Medicine*.

Health benefits associated with [regular physical activity](#) include protection from cardiovascular disease, [type 2 diabetes](#) and different [types of cancer](#). Schools are being looked to as a means for addressing [childhood obesity](#) and physical activity levels because of the amount of time students spend at school during the school year. So far, however, few physical activity programs have been effective at helping students make long-term changes.

King said the schools in the study did not increase time spent at recess. She said they often implemented before- and after-school walking programs, classroom activity breaks that included physical activity, and club sports. In addition, all school physical education staff were trained in a curriculum that emphasizes movement and [physical activity](#) over sport-specific skills.

She said programs such as HEROES do not require grant funding to be fully implemented. Many helpful resources are available online.

"All it really requires are dedicated staff members to lead the effort," King said.

HEROES is implemented by schools in southern Indiana, northwestern Kentucky and southeastern Illinois, and is sponsored by the Welborn Baptist Foundation. The IIDC and the IU School of Public Health-Bloomington have been evaluating HEROES for five years.

Provided by Indiana University

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