

# Rich or poor, schools fall short on providing physical activity

January 17 2014, by Milly Dawson

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Schools in wealthier areas are more likely to have a physical education (PE) teacher on staff than are schools in poorer areas, but students in both wealthy and less affluent areas are coming up short with regard to physical activity, finds a new study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

"Children receive many important benefits from [physical activity](#), benefits that aren't limited to health," said author Jordan Carlson, Ph.D., of the University of California, San Diego. Carlson said that beyond strengthening children's bodies, physical activity improves concentration, classroom behavior and achievement.

The researchers used data on 172 students at 97 elementary schools in San Diego and Seattle. Socioeconomic status (SES) of the schools was classified as low, medium or high based on the percentages of children receiving free meals. Children in the study wore devices that measured minutes of physical activity during [school](#) hours.

For each school surveyed, a PE teacher or principal answered 15 physical activity-related questions, such as the availability of a trained PE teacher, recess practices, whether or not classroom teachers included activity breaks into class time, etc.

At wealthier schools, students were more likely to have a trained PE teacher and to have small PE classes with fewer than 30 students. However, despite having a PE teacher, these schools were the least likely to provide the state-mandated 100 minutes per week of PE. This could be because schools with a PE teacher were less likely to incorporate physical activity into classroom time, say the authors.

Low-SES schools were more likely to provide at least 20 minutes of recess daily and moderate-SES schools were more likely to participate in a Safe Routes to School program, which promotes walking and cycling for active transportation. Low- and moderate-SES schools were more likely to have crossing guards. These latter differences, the authors note, likely reflect the greater probability that children in wealthier, more suburban areas are more likely to live further from school and thus be driven there.

Overall, despite more recess and in-class activity, children at low-SES schools had 25 fewer minutes per week of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity during school than children at wealthier schools.

"Kids living in low SES areas often lack outlets for activity near home, with less access to safe streets, parks and playgrounds," commented

Russell Pate, Ph.D., director of the Children's Physical Activity Research Group at the University of South Carolina. For them, Pate explained, schools offer a safe setting for movement.

"Reducing economic disparities in PE requires schools to prioritize physical activity," said Carlson. Pate agrees, explaining that among both educators and the public, it's a fairly new idea that physical activity contributes significantly to [children's](#) achievement. "The idea that activity is not only not a distraction from schoolwork, but that it actually supports academic success is pretty counterintuitive," he said. He noted that school superintendents in lower-income areas face mounting pressure to deliver higher achievement with fewer dollars; they often respond by pulling funds from PE.

Still, Pate said, "The idea is gaining momentum that expecting kids to sit and focus on schoolwork for six hours a day, without regular activity breaks, is ridiculous. None of us work like that."

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

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