

More physical education policies in schools have not curbed childhood obesity, say researchers

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Laws that require physical education (PE) in elementary schools are not curbing the obesity epidemic, according to a new study from public policy researchers at The University of Texas at Austin and the University of Iowa.

Between 1998 and 2016, 24 states and the District of Columbia passed laws meant to increase the time that [elementary students](#) were required or recommended to spend in school PE or PA ([physical activity](#)). Two-thirds of those states now require or at least recommend PE or PA for 150 minutes per week—the amount that is endorsed by medical authorities. Many [state laws](#), including a 2005 Texas law that requires 135 minutes of PE per week, were meant to reduce obesity among elementary students.

Researchers found that schools largely disregarded state laws and did not increase the time that elementary students actually spent in PE or recess. Relative to states that did not change their laws, states that passed increases did not see a decline in children's body mass index, overweight prevalence or obesity prevalence.

"Closer oversight of schools would be needed to improve compliance with state PE laws," said Paul von Hippel, a professor at UT Austin's LBJ School of Public Affairs, who co-authored the study. "Yet, even with better compliance, we estimate PE classes just don't burn enough calories to make a noticeable impact on obesity. At least not as they're currently conducted."

Von Hippel, along with David Frisvold, director of social and education policy research in the Public Policy Center at the University of Iowa, published the study in *The Milbank Quarterly*, a peer-reviewed health care journal covering health care policy.

The researchers said to increase the calories burned in PE, schools should increase intensity—for example, by adopting PE curricula in which children spend more time being active and less time sitting or standing as they change clothes, receive instruction, or wait in line.

Yet even at higher intensities, PE is unlikely to be enough to reverse the

[obesity epidemic.](#)

"Kids can't outrun a bad diet any more than adults can," von Hippel said. "Policies must address food and beverage consumption—not just inside schools but outside as well."

The study compared changes in elementary students' outcomes—PE time, recess time, obesity and overweight—with changes in state laws in a nationally representative sample. The total sample size was 13,920 children in 3,000 schools from two different cohorts of elementary students. One cohort attended kindergarten in 1998; the other attended kindergarten in 2010; both cohorts were followed from kindergarten through fifth grade. Researchers estimated the effects of changes to state laws in a regression with state and year fixed effects.

The researchers were surprised by how little the state laws did to increase time spent in PE or recess. But they pointed out several potential ways to improve schools' compliance with state laws governing PE and PA time. States might consider providing model schedules, or at least providing clearer guidance regarding what activities can be cut to make more time for PE or recess. States might require schools to submit their schedules and verify that they are offering enough PE and PA time. Study authors said this may get easier as more schools adopt scheduling software that lets them download and report schedules in a standard format.

Weight control is hardly the only reason for children to be physically active, however. Research shows regular, moderate to vigorous PA has a variety of physical, emotional, cognitive and [social benefits](#).

More information: Paul T. von Hippel et al, Have States Reduced Obesity by Legislating More Physical Activity in Elementary School?, *The Milbank Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1468-0009.12604](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12604)

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