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Study: Phys ed may boost girls' academic achievement

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By LM Otero, AP

12-year-olds Tabitha Ashley, left, and Mayra Trevizo jump during a physical education class at Northrich Elementary School in Richardson, Texas in December.

By Heather Terwilliger, USA TODAY

Time spent in physical education does not detract from elementary school students' ability to excel in the classroom and may even help improve girls' academic performance, a study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports.

School administrators say that as pressure increases for students to perform well in reading and math, time for extracurricular activities such as physical education is reduced.

The new study is unique because it confirms on a national level what some smaller, localized studies have concluded, says CDC epidemiologist Susan Carlson, the paper's first author. Published online in the *Journal of American Public Health*, the study indicates that trimming physical education programs may not be the best way to raise test scores in schools.

Using public data, researchers tracked the reading and math skills of more than 5,000 students between kindergarten and fifth grade as shown on a series of standardized tests. They discovered that girls who received the highest levels of physical education, or 70 to 300 minutes a week, scored consistently higher on the tests than those who spent less than 35 minutes a week.

Though they found no significant change in academic achievement for boys, Carlson speculated that a higher level of physical activity might be needed to yield the same result because boys are commonly more active than girls.

Carlson says researchers believe physical education is linked to academic achievement for both physiological and behavioral reasons. In addition to physical changes, such as increased blood flow to the brain, Carlson says such exercise programs can foster positive classroom behaviors.

This may enable better classroom participation and concentration skills and decrease disruptive behavior, which "would result in improved learning."

The findings come at a time when Carlson says only 12.6% of students in those grades meet the Healthy People 2010 objective of daily participation in phys-ed.

The study shows teachers most commonly reported that students receive physical education only one or two times a week.

"Unfortunately, schools are now being judged solely on how well their students acquire reading and math skills," says Joseph Cirsuolo of the American Association of School Administrators, adding that the two subjects are the only ones tested under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

"If you're going to be judged solely on reading and math, you're going to spend the most time possible on that ... which cuts into time for every subject area, including physical education," he says.

With time such a precious commodity, schools are becoming harder pressed to incorporate structured physical education into a balanced subject load. In part, this is due to a change in the nature of physical education itself.

"It has truly become an education program, not just glorified recess anymore," Cirsuolo says. The period is now designed to instill in students habits and knowledge that educators hope will keep them physically fit for the rest of their lives.

"What we're fighting for at the national level is 30 minutes of quality physical education with a competent teacher every day," says Craig Buschner of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. This 150 minutes a week accounts for only half of what Buschner says many advocate that children should get in the way of moderate physical activity.

Just making children run laps won't necessarily make them smarter, Buschner cautions. "We're talking about learning. ... Our goal is to guide children and youth in the process of being physically active for life."

But Cirsuolo says educators are frustrated at schools constantly being caught in the middle of dueling expectations. "If you want a broad curriculum ... then we (schools) should be judged on how we educate the whole child, not just on reading and math."

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