



Research Report of the Month JANUARY 2004

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (author).

Healthy Schools for Healthy Kids.

Retrieved December 20, 2003, from <http://www.rwjf.org>.

Introduction

For this January issue of UnlockResearch, the research report selected for examination will depart from the usual format of a study published in a refereed academic journal. Instead, the Research Report of the Month was neither refereed nor printed in the traditional format of a hard-copy publication. This is a report of research that was both funded and published by a private philanthropic foundation, and that now has been made available to the public through the electronic means of the organization's Web site.

I believe you might find this deviation from custom interesting for any of several reasons: (1) it will introduce you to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), a large philanthropic organization (with enormous fiscal resources) that has found it expedient to support research involving public school physical education, (2) it will provide examples of inquiry performed by people employed in commercial entities rather than in academic institutions, (3) it will underscore some of the great strengths (as well as the serious limitations) of that arrangement for investigation of educational practice and social policy, and (4) it will invite you to access the methods, results, conclusions, and recommendations of the study – as well as the large collection of resource material appended. All of this should be of interest to any physical educator – if only because of how rare it is to find such extensive (and expensive) attention given to what's going on in the gym.

The Study

Announced on 12/04/03 in a news release from the RWJF, two national polls of teachers and parents concerning nutrition and physical education in public schools have now been completed. The polling studies were components within a larger research project entitled *Healthy Schools for Healthy Kids* (HSHK). The news release, full HSHK report, and a nine-page executive summary are available on the RWJF Web site at <http://www.rwjf.org/> (from the main page go to the HSHK sub-site).

RWJF is the nation's largest philanthropic organization devoted exclusively to health and health care. In partnership with the National Education Association (NEA), the Foundation retained Pyramid Communications (specialists in strategic planning and public affairs) to identify opportunities for increasing children's physical activity and healthy eating in schools nationwide. To that end, the Pyramid group conducted an investigation of relevant policies and programs between November 1, 2002 and May 1, 2003. As a component within that effort, two companies specializing in marketing research, polling, and consultation, Lake Snell Perry & Associates, and Market Strategies, were sub-contracted to poll 500 public school teachers and 800 parents in May and August of 2003. The accounts from those three investigations, when taken together, form the project report for HSHK.

Design and Method

This review will omit attention to components of HSHK that were directed at the problems of improving school nutrition and developing after-school programs for increasing children's physical activity. Both of those are fully described in the on-line report, and attention here will be limited to the topic of physical education. For reasons that will become evident, it is important to understand that the report document itself was produced by [the text was written by] the employees of Pyramid – and not by the staff of the RWJF. Because the HSHK report involves several independent studies, I will consider them in sequence, beginning with the examination of public policy and school programs performed by Pyramid Communications.

Pyramid undertook numerous activities to review local, state, and national physical activity-related policies affecting children in schools. The review focused on:

- **state PE policies and relevant legislation** (by means of telephone conversations with personnel in state education agencies; retrieval of policy texts from Web sites; review of legislative Web sites in all 50 states; consultation with representatives of the National Council of State Legislatures; interviews with legislative staff in states where bills impacting PE were before the legislature; monitoring of media sources at all levels for relevant evidence of policy activity related to PE, and development of a comprehensive state policy database), and
- **federal PE policies and related legislation** (by strategies similar to those used at the state level).

In addition, Pyramid surveyed in-school programs to identify and collect information about promising practices and programs that function to increase children's physical activity. To accomplish that they employed the following data collection strategies:

- consulted Internet sources such as those maintained by the Center for Disease Control and by a variety of academic journals,
- interviewed university scholars, program leaders, government agency officials, education association representatives, and personnel in private agencies such as the YMCA and YWCA,
- developed a descriptive inventory of 21 in-school programs and formally interviewed the leaders of 15,
- reviewed online resources, print materials, scientific evaluations, curricula, and interview results relevant to each program,
- conducted site visits to four in-school programs, observed those programs at several school sites, interviewed the site program directors, PE teachers, classroom teachers, principals, and students, as well as researchers who had investigated the programs, all with particular attention to identifying conditions that enhanced or inhibited implementation, and structural elements that might be related to sustainable replication in other schools,
- monitored local, state, and national media for evidence of new programs or information about those already identified.

Results

The results were presented in four sections: (1) the current state of policy and practice regarding physical activity in public schools, (2) recommendations, (3) descriptions of promising in-school practices and particularly promising programs for increasing physical activity, and (4) a complete listing of all programs reviewed for the HSHK project. Primary attention here will be given only to the results described in the first section. It should be noted that the authors of the report do not observe the conventional distinction between results and conclusions (or, in some cases, between conclusions and recommendations).

At the outset, the report documents the extent and severity of the problem of inactivity – and the corollary problem of obesity. This material appears to have been drawn largely from a review of early survey reports such as the Center for Disease Control's School Health Policies and Program Study (2000) and Youth Risk Behaviors Surveys (1991-1997). Most of this material will be familiar to physical educators. For example:

- 8% of elementary schools 6% of middle/junior high schools, and 9% of senior high schools provide daily PE,
- During the 1990s, the percentage of high school students enrolled in daily PE dropped from 42% to 29%,
- Illinois is the only state that has a daily PE requirement for grades K-12, but many schools are

exempted, and the policy is not strongly enforced.

All of which led Pyramid to conclude that physical activity is the exception rather than the norm in schools, and that PE is offered sporadically or is entirely absent for most children. More dramatically, the report suggests that at this time schools are part of the problem rather than the solution.

The review of local, state, and federal policies produced results that may be less widely known among physical educators. Much of this is captured in the following quotation.

Our review of local, state, and federal policies on ... PE revealed intricate connections between policies at all levels. A single policy at the federal level can have far-reaching, and sometimes unintended effects on policies at the local level. However, many policies are rendered ineffectual due to enforcement issues and the general leniency of policy language (emphasis mine). Exceptions were found in California, and in a growing number of schools and districts where tougher standards to increase children's physical activity are being put in place. (p. 8)

Among the more general findings were:

- state education agencies claim PE policies are not enforced because there already are too many mandated curriculum requirements,
- many states defer to school districts on various elements of PE policy (time per week, graduation requirements, etc.) but our research revealed that teachers and principals gave PE a low priority,
- issues such as local control, new academic standards and decreased budgets inhibit state education agencies from independently strengthening their policies on PE,
- school districts want local control and to retain their ability to make policy, but most district policies relative to PE are old, were last revised 10 to 20 years ago, and provide little initiative to make physical activity a priority,
- while policy changes relative to PE (at all governmental levels) have been difficult to realize, once that has been accomplished, they often prove even more difficult to enforce,
- at the federal and state levels, the majority of the proposed legislation designed to improve requirements and conditions for PE failed to pass (state actions between 2001 and 2003 in Arkansas, California, Mississippi, and Texas being exceptions that offer some hope for driving change at the local level).

It was findings such as those that led Pyramid to conclude the following about improving in-school programs for physical education.

- Programs need time to succeed and that interval will differ across schools.
- Training, including mandatory training for teachers, is critical to successful implementation.
- The "New PE" which emphasizes personal fitness and lifelong activities over team sports is increasingly recognized as an effective alternative to traditional PE classes.
- Providing kids with a sense of program ownership increases learning and participation and helps maximize success of in-school programs.
- Strong district level support, particularly from upper-level administration, significantly increases teacher buy-in.
- Schools without a strong program leader or cohesive planning team have greater problems with implementation.
- Implementation is hindered by the growing emphasis on academics and testing requirements.
- Many schools lack sufficient funding for both PE equipment and the training needed for successful implementation.

Pyramid's recommendations are simple and explicit:

1. Provide 30 minutes of PE for every child, every day in every grade.
2. Implement "New PE" programs that include fitness activities, are non-competitive, teach individual goal setting, and maximize the use of time to provide a minimum of 30 minutes daily of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.
3. Conduct regular physical fitness testing in schools.
4. Make physical activity fun.
5. Teach younger kids the basic skills they need to participate in physical activity.
6. Provide activities that encourage lifelong physical activity.

Design and Method

Teacher and Parent Opinion Polls. Five hundred public school teachers belonging to the NEA were randomly selected and polled by phone. Six hundred parents with at least one child in a public school, plus an oversample of 100 Hispanic and 100 African-American parents were polled by phone (all parents were drawn from a random-digit dial sample). For each group polled, that sample was stratified geographically by state, based on the proportion of teachers or parents in each region. Data in each poll were weighted by region and race to reflect the attributes of the actual population of teachers and parents.

Results

The polls revealed an extraordinary level of agreement rarely seen in polls. Teachers and parents often have little agreement on school-related issues; however in these two polls they were almost unanimous. The results show that PE is overwhelmingly supported by teachers and parents. A sample of those results follow.

- Teachers (81%) and parents (85%) favor schools requiring students to take PE every day at every grade level.
- Both teachers and parent agree (86%) that PE should provide at least 30 minutes of physical activity every day, K-12.
- Teachers (97%) and parents (88%) agree that PE should not be cut for budgetary reasons.
- Teachers (82%) and parents (73%) agree that PE time should not be reduced to spend more time on academics.
- Teachers (90%) and parents (86%) believe that physically active children are better able to learn.
- Teachers (94%) and parents (89%) are in favor of new types of PE that include lifelong activities in which every child can find something they like to do.
- Teachers and parents have been educated on the issues, including the consequences of inactivity, and support more stringent policies to get kids active.

The parent poll has a reported error rate of +/- 4%, and the teacher poll has a reported error rate of +/- 4.4%

Physical educators will be interested to know that the four promising in-school programs selected for site-visits included Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids (SPARK), and the Coordinated Approach to Childhood Health (CATCH), both of which have appeared in the pages of *Unlock Research*, as well as the Spokane Public Schools PE Program. All three of these are well described in the report, with special attention being given to their reach, measures of success (evaluation), replicability, and the primary components related to their success.

Discussion

As the report is generally transparent and devoid of any technical obfuscations, readers can contemplate methods, results, and recommendations for themselves. Certainly they will get little argument from me about the findings, as they are generally congruent with what I have read in other studies, as well as with my personal experiences as a parent and teacher. The more interesting questions deal with the extent to which the HSHK report represents "research" as it is commonly understood, or, even, whether it is to be considered research by any standard.

Here are some ways in which the report differs from what we ordinarily find in refereed research journals.

1. The absence of descriptions of methodology (i.e., the telephone interview protocols) makes it impossible to judge the adequacy of data collection.
2. There are striking discontinuities among findings, conclusions, and recommendations (i.e. nothing in the report's findings supports the recommendation that physical fitness tests should be given on a regular basis – other than the fact that they are a component of the California program that is described and much praised by the Pyramid investigators).
3. At critical points, the text slips into excessive exuberance (or exhortative excess), as when it is claimed that the findings of this study show that physical activity programs can foster long-term healthy habits in children and contribute significantly to prevention [of health problems]. I dearly wish that either Pyramid or anyone else had provided conclusive evidence on that score – but the longitudinal outcome studies of PE programs that I have read would never support such an optimistic conclusion about their long-term impact on adults.

Lest you think that my intention is to dismiss the HSHK report, I want to underscore some of the truly impressive aspects in that research project.

1. If you attended closely to the methods section above, you will have some inkling of the range and power represented in the design – and the very substantial costs involved. It seems possible that nothing of this order has ever been attempted with public school physical education as a primary focus – with the possible exception of the SPARK research program. As elsewhere, if you know how to spend it wisely – money can buy quality.
2. There is a real advantage to be found by involving investigators from outside physical education. It is quite likely that some of their observations could not have been made by the usual contributors to our own literature (for example, the finding that policy statements involving physical education tend to use particularly lenient language, or the fact that policy enforcement has proven more difficult than policy creation).
3. Research specialists from the areas of strategic planning, public policy development, marketing, and polling clearly are quick studies. They got so much right in such a short period of exposure that I can't help but admire their capacity to absorb the tangled nuances of our professional business.

No, this is not research in its traditional form, nor is it research reporting that makes critical judgments easy (or even possible in some respects). Wherever it may fit into the architectonics of scientific inquiry, however, several things are clear. It makes fascinating reading, it is full of useful insights, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation fully deserves our thanks for footing the bill.