

Physical Education Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of the WV Healthy Lifestyles Act (HB 2816) on Educational Practices and Childhood Obesity



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BACKGROUND

In 2005, the West Virginia Legislature enacted the **West Virginia Healthy Lifestyles Act (House Bill 2816)** mandating a number of school-based policies to combat childhood obesity. These changes included vending and beverage restrictions, health education, fitness and body composition assessment, and required physical education time.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study was to examine the perceptions of PE teachers regarding the impact of the **WV Healthy Lifestyles Act** on their practices and schools, and the extent to which these perceptions vary as a function of school level (elementary, middle, and high school). This information represents the first year benchmark data which will serve as the comparison point for future evaluations.

METHODS

Physical Education teachers at West Virginia public schools (N = 696) were surveyed in the Spring of 2008 as part of an ongoing project to evaluate the **WV Healthy Lifestyles Act (House Bill 2816)**. Three hundred ninety-eight teachers responded to our mailed survey seeking information regarding their perceptions of physical education and physical activity requirements in the schools. Fifty-one percent of the respondents were male (49% female), with 68% having more than 10 years of teaching experience. Elementary school PE teachers comprised 64% of the sample, while middle school and high school respondents comprised 17% and 14%, respectively.

The survey instrument consisted of 65 questions in eight domains. The survey elicited information regarding teacher opinions of House Bill 2816, body mass index, fitness testing, the school PE and PA environment, physical activity, the use of **Dance, Dance, Revolution**, wellness, and demographic information.

RESULTS

Overall, physical education teachers at each of the three school levels did not differ in their ratings of the following items:

- Almost 90% reported that it was important to measure students' BMI at school.
- Approximately 99% reported that it was important to assess fitness levels.
- The majority (56%) of PE teachers had not been contacted by parents regarding fitness testing.
- The overwhelming majority of PE teachers reported that students who performed poorly or particularly well on fitness tests were not teased (73% and 93%, respectively). Less than 1% of students were "often teased."

There were however, several notable areas in which differences were identified as a function of school level.

- The social environment in high schools was reported by PE teachers as being the least supportive of physical activity among students (p = .003), as shown in **Figure 1**.
- Compared to peers at other school levels, high school PE teachers regarded (non-PE) teachers as the least encouraging of physical activity (p = .009).
- Elementary schools were rated more favorably than middle or high schools in efforts to incorporate physical activity into academic classes (non-PE).
- Elementary school PE teachers rated their schools as having the poorest indoor facilities for PE (p = .035), while middle schools were rated as having the poorest outdoor facilities for PE (p = .05).
- Students in elementary schools were reported by PE teachers as spending significantly more time engaged in moderate/vigorous physical activity than high schools students (p = .037).

As illustrated in **Figure 2**, physical education teachers reported that teasing about weight was more frequent in middle schools than either elementary or high schools (p < .001).

CONCLUSIONS

The survey respondents indicated that while fitness and body composition components of the legislation were implemented without significantly impacting their practices, other factors remain that may mitigate the effectiveness of this legislation. In particular, PE teachers noted difficulties in the social context in schools regarding fitness, physical activity, and obesity. High schools were reported to be the least supportive of physical activity, and elementary schools were identified as more frequently incorporating physical activity into the academic curriculum, and having a greater percentage of PE time involving moderate/vigorous physical activity. Students in middle schools were more likely to be teased due to weight, and teasing related to fitness levels (either good or poor) was noted to be infrequent. These data suggest that the initial impact of the legislation on PE teachers has not been overwhelming, and that a number of social and environmental factors present in the school setting may be important to address as well.

SUPPORT

The evaluation of the **WV Healthy Lifestyles Act (HB 2816)** was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Figure 1: Social Environment Support of Student Physical Activity

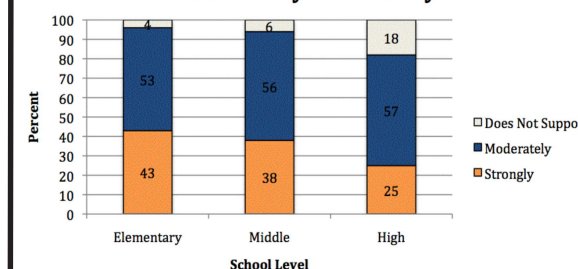


Figure 2: Weight-Related Teasing

