COMMENTARY

Physical Activity Breaks Improve Student Attention in the Classroom

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Leading public health organizations recommend that children receive 60 minutes of daily physical activity and that elementary schools provide at least 30 minutes of daily physical activity during school hours. California mandates 200 minutes of Physical Education per every 10 school days (20 minutes per day) in elementary schools, though there is currently not a mandated number of minutes of physical activity during school. To provide children with the recommended 30 minutes of daily physical activity during school, some schools are providing opportunities for physical activity in the classroom in addition to Physical Education and recess.

In this study, our objective was to investigate whether providing classroom physical activity breaks was related to (1) whether students met the recommended 30-minutes of daily physical activity during school, and (2) student behavior in the classroom. In summer 2013, 6 school districts in California were funded by The California Endowment to train teachers to provide daily 10-minute physical activity breaks in the classroom using their choice of an evidence-based program. Implementation strategies varied across districts, with primary components in all districts including appointing a district-level coordinator to provide teacher trainings, technical assistance, support groups, and materials specific to classroom physical activity breaks (e.g., handouts, instruction books, videos, websites).

By spring 2014, 70% of teachers from the 24 elementary schools studied reported attempting to provide physical activity breaks at least once and 44% of teachers reported regularly providing physical activity breaks. Teachers who provided regular physical activity breaks reported providing an average of 15 minutes per day. Students in classrooms with physical activity breaks were 75% more likely to meet the recommended 30 minutes per day of physical activity. These students were also less likely to lack effort or motivation and be off-task or inattentive during class time. We also found that only one-third of students were provided with the mandated 200 minutes of Physical Education every 10 days, so the classroom physical activity breaks were critical to supporting their physical activity.

In conclusion, using evidence-based programs to provide physical activity in the classroom appears to be a promising strategy for supporting a sufficient amount of physical activity during school. Findings suggested that physical activity breaks could be an effective way to improve student behavior and attention in the classroom, and most teachers who provided physical activity breaks believed strongly that physical activity breaks resulted in these benefits. To provide a sufficient amount of physical activity for students, (1) the mandated 200 minutes per week of Physical Education needs to be enforced (2) in addition to providing other physical activity opportunities such as classroom physical activity breaks.

The full study can be found in Carlson, Jordan A., et al. "Implementing classroom physical activity breaks: Associations with student physical activity and classroom behavior." Preventive medicine 81 (2015): 67-72.

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