

State Legislators' Perspectives on Child Obesity Prevention and Policy



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Thank you!

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- Douglas W. Ellison, PhD, Kent State University
- Kim C. Graber, EdD, University of Illinois
- Amelia Mays Woods, PhD, University of Illinois



Illinois in 2015-2016

- Mandated daily physical education
- Robust PE waiver policy
- Bottom half in prevalence child overweight and obesity
- Very contentious general political landscape



Background

- State policy plays a key role in the provision of school-based physical activity (Slater, Nicholson, Chriqui, Turner, & Chaloupka, 2012)
- Stronger state level physical education and physical activity policies are associated with local school practices (Calvert, Turner, Leider, Piekarz-Porter, & Chriqui, 2020)
- Lawmakers perceptions of public health-related issues influence their legislative priorities (Dodson, et al., 2013)



Research Questions

Study #1

1. How do state lawmakers perceive the magnitude of the child overweight and obesity issue in their state?
2. How do state lawmakers perceive the effectiveness of legislation in promoting child wellness in their state?



Method

- Qualitative exploratory design
- In depth, semi-structured phone interviews (Patton, 2015)
- All lawmakers provided consent for participation and all but one participated in an audio recorded phone interview
- Interviews lasted 30-75 minutes



Participants

TABLE 1 – Demographic Information for Participating State Legislators

Gender	Party	Legislative Branch	Voting District Locale	Years in current position (M ± SD)
19 female	18 democrat	22 Representatives	15 suburban	9.2 ± 7.6
11 male	12 republican	8 Senators	9 urban	
			6 rural	

Note. At the time of the study, the state legislature was comprised of 59 senators and 118 representatives, of which 104 were Democrat and 73 were Republican.



Data Analysis

- Conventional content analysis
- Initially analyzed using inductive approaches
- Negative case analysis



Themes From Study #1

(Killian, Kern, Ellison, Graber, & Woods, 2020)

1. Child overweight and obesity is problematic, but...
budgetary issues took precedence
2. Current legislation is ineffective in addressing the problem
 - Legislating personal behavior is a challenge
 - Negative cases involved two legislators involved in successful community level child obesity reduction initiatives
3. Funding and enforcement is difficult
4. Efforts from other levels of the SEM are more effective



Key Conclusions

- Legislative processes are complex (and political), and outlook seemed mostly focused on short-term initiatives
- Lawmakers did not appear fully aware of the broad and interconnected nature of child wellness policies and state economics
- Understanding outcomes from legislators' perspectives may inform advocacy
 - "Just because we pass a bill doesn't mean it changes anything."
 - "We are doing a lot, but not getting a lot for what we do."
 - "We have a daily PE requirement and it has done nothing to curb childhood obesity. Other states do not have a daily requirement for PE and they have better health statistics."

Research Questions

Study #2

1. What are state lawmakers' perceptions of schools' role in the promotion of child wellness?
2. To what extent do state lawmakers' perceptions align with the CSPAP framework?



Active Students = Better Learners

www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/PEandPA

Shift in Thinking about Schools

To ***integrated, network-focused PA promoters***

(face-to-face to social distance to remote/online...?)



From ***discrete, student-focused PA providers***

Background

- Whole school approaches broaden the policy scope
- Policy represents a key area of development for the implementation and success of whole school PA approaches (McMullen, Chroinin, Tammelin, Pogozeleska & van der Mars, 2015)
- State policy plays a key role in the provision of school-based PA (e.g. Slater, Nicholson, Chriqui, Turner, & Chaloupka, 2012)
- Lawmakers perceptions of public health-related issues influence their legislative priorities (Dodson, et al., 2013)



Themes from Study #2 (in preparation)

1. Believed Schools *Should* Provide PA Opportunities
2. Perceived Value of Physical Education Related to Personal Experience and Dictated Level of Support
3. Health Education and Healthy Eating Should Take Precedence as Wellness Supporting Actions
4. Communities and Parents are More Important than State Legislation



Schools Should Provide PA Opportunities

Most lawmakers spoke of schools providing general physical activity opportunities. Some mentioned sport and after school, but answers generally emphasized physical education and recess.

“I think that the schools are like the first line on the battlefield [of physical activity promotion]”

“I think that is maybe the best way to promote wellness among the young, is to ensure that they are staying fit and doing it in the schools is probably the best”

“I believe that schools have a crucial role in making sure that students are staying active. If they are not active at home then at least we can help them to be active while at school and activity can take on many forms.”



Perceived Value of Physical Education Dictated Support

Lawmakers were largely indifferent to the value of physical education. Those with positive views based them on personal and exemplary cases.

“Well PE unfortunately is a joke. The reason that we don't support the PE programs, the idea of kids taking a semester of bowling or a semester of archery or even divide up teams and play softball... that doesn't raise kids' heart rates. That is not exercise... Teachers are lazy and don't want to exercise kids. We legislators realize that the PE teachers have no clue what they are doing and aren't interested in getting kids healthy”

“When I go into schools it is embarrassing to see how fat PE teachers are. And those are the ones that are protesting we need more mandatory PE? Why don't you start with yourself first?”



Health Education and Healthy Eating Should Take Precedence

“I think we would be better off requiring daily nutrition classes and lifestyle health classes than PE classes.”

“[Wellness] starts with the food. We can't stop what people do with their own money. But it starts in the school and changing the food program. If the kids do not like it, fine. But let them go hungry, after a while they will learn to eat.”

“I think [schools] should be held more responsible for ensuring that these kids have a proper diet than anything. And while we are there, it is really important that these kids learn how to eat properly, the meals that they are served, because they get two meals a day while they are in schools.”



Communities and Parents are More Important than State Legislation

“We can do a lot to intervene in schools and community events, but it is the parents who ultimately have the decision about what their children consume and how active they are.”

“[Child wellness] comes down to the parents. The schools can do all they want to do, but it’s still, what happens when that child goes home?”

“It takes a family to be more engaged and involved with their student’s day- ‘How much physical activity did they get?’ It’s up to you to make sure your (child) has a little more physical activity, doesn’t eat late at night, doesn’t eat so many sweets, things of that nature.”



Through the Whole School Lens

- Lawmakers believed schools should provide physical activity opportunities
- Conceptions of school promoted physical activity generally limited to recess and physical education
- Recognized communities' and parents' roles in promoting PA, *but not in conjunction with broader whole-school PA initiatives*



Conclusions and Implications

- If physical education is going to continue to be the keystone of whole-school physical activity promotion, then quality **must** improve
- Advocacy efforts at the state-level should focus, in part, on introducing CSPAP to lawmakers
- Participants were quick to reference experiences, which emphasized the importance of quality opportunities
- Evolution of physical education is an opportunity for change
- ***Legislators perceptions can drive wellness policy decisions***



Interestingly...

- These interviews proved predictive of a new state law enacted following our interviews
- The law drastically increased education spending
- And also eliminated the daily PE mandate by reducing requirements to a minimum of three days per week
- Provided full waiver for 7-12 graders in school sports and extra-curricular activities



THANK YOU!

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