

NEWS



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Report Finds Massachusetts Girls Lag Behind Boys in Sports Participation *Face Discrimination, Fewer Opportunities for Athletics*

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Boston, MA— A report from the Harvard Prevention Research Center on Nutrition and Physical Activity at the Harvard School of Public Health (HPRC) and the National Women's Law Center (NWLC), in Washington D.C., finds that girls in Massachusetts consistently lag behind boys in their participation in physical activity, depriving them of the health, social and emotional benefits of playing sports. The report, *Keeping Score: Girls' Participation in High School Athletics in Massachusetts*, explores the persistent discrimination that girls in Massachusetts high schools face in sports participation opportunities and treatment of their teams.

The report calls for strengthened enforcement of state gender discrimination laws; assistance to schools to enable them to achieve gender equity; education about the importance of sports participation; and partnerships between public health professionals and gender equity advocates to address barriers and promote girls' participation in physical activity.

Key findings from *Keeping Score: Girls' Participation in High School Athletics in Massachusetts*:

- 36% of Boston high school girls participated in one or more sports teams in 2001, compared to 55% of high school boys.
- Statewide, 50% of high school girls participated in one or more sports teams in 2001, compared with 58% of high school boys.
- Statewide, only 37% of African American high school girls and 28% of Hispanic girls participated in sports teams in 2001, while 54% of white high school girls played on a team.

The report examines complaints filed during the past five years with U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights and information obtained through interviews with athletes, parents, coaches, administrators and advocates, and finds numerous barriers to girls' participation in organized sports teams, particularly when it comes to opportunities to play and treatment when they do play. The full report is available at <http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/KeepingScoreGirlsHSAthleticsInMA2004.pdf> and <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/press/releases/sports/keepingscorereport.pdf>

"Obesity is epidemic throughout the country, and physical activity is a critical component of efforts to address this public health crisis," said Jean Wiecha, PhD, Senior Research Scientist at HPRC. "Disparities in physical activity deny young women equal access to the important health benefits derived from exercise and sports."

Sex discrimination in athletics in Massachusetts public schools is prohibited by Title IX, the 1972 federal law that bars discrimination in all federally funded educational activities. Gender equity protections also exist in the Equal Rights Amendment to the Massachusetts Constitution, the Massachusetts Anti-Discrimination Law, and the Equal Opportunity Regulations of the Anti-Discrimination law.

Participation in physical activity has been shown not only to decrease a young woman's chance of becoming overweight and developing obesity-related illnesses, and sports participation is also associated with lower prevalence of depression, pregnancy, sexual activity, smoking and drug use. Female student athletes also have higher grades and graduation rates than their non-athletic peers. Participation in sports is especially important for girls of color. African American female athletes are 15% more likely to graduate from college.

"Girls are getting the short end of the stick when it comes to opportunities to play sports, access to equal facilities and equipment and are subject to stereotypes about their interests and abilities," said Jocelyn Samuels, NWLC's Vice President for Education and Employment. "Massachusetts lawmakers, schools, coaches, and parents must do more to eliminate the inequities between girls' and boys' athletics and to help improve girls' health, education and overall wellness."

The report finds failures to provide girls with teams, harassment of girls who played on boys' teams when no girls' teams were offered, poor quality of facilities, lack of adequate uniforms, and scheduling of games during non-prime-time hours. At one school, pole vault was provided only for boys. When girls were eventually told they could participate, they could only do so after purchasing their own poles at \$200 each, even though the school had provided the boys with poles. Another school forced girls to travel over a mile to get to their practice and game field, when boys had a separate practice and game field located on school property.

While some schools have taken steps to eliminate gender inequities in their athletic programs, the study recommends public education regarding the importance of physical activity and girls' rights to equality in school-sponsored athletics, and increasing girls' opportunities to play sports at younger ages by providing more opportunities to play.

Keeping Score also recommends that state officials develop formal procedures to process complaints of violations of anti-discrimination laws and provide guidance to schools on how to investigate complaints of discrimination. The study further urges state legislators to conduct regular oversight investigations into the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws by the Massachusetts Department of Education and require schools and the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association to collect data on school athletic programs and submit annual reports on compliance activities.

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The National Women's Law Center is a non-profit organization that has been working since 1972 to advance and protect women's legal rights. The Center focuses on major policy areas of importance to women and their families including economic security, education, employment and health, with special attention given to the concerns of low-income women. For more information on the Center visit: www.nwlc.org

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