



Infrastructural Health Equity and Racial Justice for Youth in New York City Public Schools and Public Spaces

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Physical activity, like healthy food, sleep, and positive social relationships, is a powerful predictor of multiple health benefits, including better mental health, physical health, happiness, and lower health care costs. Yet like many other cities, New York has allowed its schools, parks, and other public places—the infrastructure that enables physical activity—to deteriorate. This is especially true in low-income, Black, and Latinx communities, which have experienced a history of limited infrastructural investments. This, coupled with disproportionate and exclusionary disciplining policies and policing, has resulted in education and health inequities with long-term negative consequences for low income, Black, and Latinx students.

By making New York City a healthier, more equitable place to live, work and play, its leaders have an opportunity to close racial and ethnic gaps in health and well-being, as well as bolster the economic stability of communities of color.

Improving the Health of New York City's Youth

Increased physical activity has been linked to better mood, enhanced self-esteem, lower levels of anxiety, decreasing depression, and reduced incidence of chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes—conditions that disproportionately affect communities of color. Yet, only 14% of New York City youth recently reported being active for 60 minutes or more every day. In fact, school surveys show that more youth reported vaping (15%) or drinking alcohol (21%) over the past month than being physically active for at least 60 minutes a day. Surveys also report rising rates of youth mental health problems, psychological distress, and emergency department visits due to mental illness. In addition to the personal cost to individuals and their communities, the financial toll of chronic diseases could cost New York City over \$1.5 billion every year through 2030.

In examining how best to encourage greater levels of exercise in young people, researchers found that a school's environment determines approximately 50% of young people's overall physical activity levels. A safe and clean school environment, with dedicated activity spaces, contributes to young people's ability to take part in physical activity. However, even though evidence shows that a school's environment can significantly harm or improve mental and physical health, New York City has failed to dedicate sufficient funds towards physical activity and recreation infrastructure improvements in New York City public schools and public spaces. This funding gap is widest in areas that serve communities of color.

Historically, changes to New York City's infrastructure, such as highway development and neighborhood rezoning, has often benefited better-off communities at the expense of communities of color. This underinvestment in the schools and public spaces in low-income communities has contributed to fewer and lower quality nearby parks in these areas, creating a lack of public, healthy infrastructure for youth living in the highest poverty. In addition, schools in high-poverty areas tend to lack basic repairs, consistent maintenance, and quality facilities. Adding to the troubling state of schools and public spaces, young people of color face challenges in simply accessing the school environment at all—suspensions, expulsions, and referrals prevent more Black children, students with special needs or students with intersectional identities from being physically active or receiving instruction in a classroom or school building, further widening gaps in access to safe physical spaces.

Recommendations

Young people and students across New York City need safe, accessible, and stable environments in which they have the opportunity to engage in physical activity. Creating such spaces can boost their physical and mental health, and begin to redress the history of underinvestment and over-policing in their communities. Specific steps by which New York City's leaders can capitalize on this opportunity include new efforts to:

Invest in Parks and Public Spaces. The Trust for Public Land created the NYC Park Equity Plan (2021) outlining the inequities in New York City public parks and tools like the Heat Vulnerability index show where populations are vulnerable to extreme heat. Their equity plan highlights recommendations to bring 100% of New York City residents with a 10-minute walk to a park. They suggest almost doubling the current New York City parks operating budget to support the staffing, programming, and maintenance needs of current and new parks. The NYC Community Parks Initiative is an example of strategic capital investments in parks that have been ignored for decades through equitable targeted improvements and community input.

Fund Healthy Physical Environments in Schools. New York State lawmakers including the New York State Senate Committee on Education and the New York City Council Committee on Education should advocate for Fair Student Funding to go towards healthy environment improvements, including designated spaces for physical activity. In addition, they should coordinate healthy school enhancements with energy improvements funding allocated for New York City public school facilities through Build Back Better School Infrastructure grant funds.

Nurture our Marginalized Students. Funding programs that aim to heal and protect students like Restorative Justice or Trauma-Centered Schools will center the well-being of our students and consider the whole child. This means equipping schools with the right ratio of nurses (between 1:225, or 1:750 depending on the needs of the student population) and counselors (1:250) to students. Instituting programs that mandate adults care for our students and tracking the progress is critical in keeping our students engaged and safe in schools.

With these steps, real progress can be made towards reversing the decline in physical activity in young people, and better protect the health and wellbeing of all New Yorkers.