Reviewer's report

Title: Differences in school environment, school policy and actions regarding overweight prevention between Dutch schools. A nationwide survey.

Version: 1 Date: 19 May 2009

Reviewer: Karin Bammann

Reviewer’s report:

Major Compulsory Revisions
1) Page 6, (45 outcome variables): In general, it does not seem to be a good idea to declare such a huge number of outcome variables. If this is left like this, multiple testing becomes an issue and should be discussed. Alternatively, descriptive statistics could be presented for most of the variables and a lower number (e.g. a score) should be used for statistical testing.

2) To use higher education schools as reference category is not appropriate since this is a very small group and statistical power is diminished. Instead, mixed schools or vocational education schools should be used.

3) Page 8, School environment, “where the student regularly go”. Was this part of the questionnaire or how is this information obtained? If this is just a guess, please provide evidence or delete from the text. And please correct into “students”.

4) Adjustment for school size (cf. also pages 9, 11): School size is only used for adjustment but this variable is of interest on its own especially since it seems to be more influential than school type. Therefore, the results for school size should be presented. The same is true for other indicators (e.g. SES of district, male/female-ratio etc.) apart from school type, if available. Although it might be true that for obesity prevention no differential approach for school type is needed, it might be the case for other variables (like school size).

5) Table 2: Please give school size in categories as for example also presented in the text, page 11.

6) Why is the number of “Water cooler present at school” (table 3) lower than “The school placed water coolers” (table 5)?

7) Page 13 “However, vocational education schools seemed to be more aware of the overweight problem than higher educational schools”. Please include in the discussion of this result the fact (stated in the introduction) that in vocational education schools the prevalence of overweight is higher than in other schools.

8) Page 13/14 “The response of the questionnaire was good”. A response rate of 44% is not “good”, but low, and this is a clear flaw of the study. The discussion of the response rate is not sufficient. It is not a valid argument that “non-response bias is unlikely” simply because different school sizes, school levels and regions were represented. It is e.g. quite possible that school directors more interested in
the topic would be more eager to participate than others. Another bias could be introduced by the different persons filling in the questionnaire. How e.g. do the food-related answers differ depending whether canteen personnel was involved in answering the questionnaire? Furthermore, it remains completely unclear whether school directors of vocational education schools should be more prone to give social desired answers than other school directors.

9) Other issues on page 14: “The school level is not related to degree of urbanisation”. Is there any statistic available proving this?
10) “it is likely that the curriculum differs between school levels”. Why is this not known, but has to be guessed? Are single schools in the Netherlands free to make their own curriculum and are there no state regulations on this? If yes, please state this fact.

Minor Revisions:
11) “Breaks” are misspelled as “brakes” throughout the text, please correct.
12) Page 3, SES vs. “SES” (bottom of page), please chose uniform writing.
13) Page 5, second para “. first mail was sent to all secondary schools ..”, please add “of the Netherlands”
14) Page 7, last full stop is missing.
15) Page 10, line 3 “Sixty-five percent” please change into “65 %”.
16) Table 3, last row, please correct “there are there facilities”.
17) Table 3, please correct “. contains more unhealthy than healthy foods”
18) Table 3, please correct “The student are “
19) Please carefully revise all tables and text for spelling errors.

Discretionary revisions:
20) Readability would be enhanced for readers not familiar with the Dutch school system if school types would not change their names in the course of the text .e.g. page 3 “Preparatory vocational education” vs. “Vocational secondary education”.
21) Page 8 “Reasons for non-response and study characteristics”: The sequence of these aspects is a bit unusual. I would suggest changing into “Study characteristics and reasons for non-response”. Also, paras 2 and 3 should be exchanged in this section because as it is now, the description moves from details to the broader picture.
22) Page 16: In order to make a stronger point with the paper, I would shift the whole aspect on data on individual level before the statements on the important role that schools could play in overweight prevention. As it is, the paper ends with a rather minor aspect which does not give justice to the study.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.