

The School's Role in Ensuring Young People Are Appropriately Physically Active

Regular physical activity is essential for maintaining a healthy body and mind. It burns calories, regulates blood sugar, supports cardiovascular health by lowering blood pressure and cholesterol, and promotes arterial flexibility. Beyond physical benefits, being active enhances energy levels, mental well-being, and engagement at school.

Research consistently shows physical activity is linked to improved physical health (e.g., cardiorespiratory fitness, muscular strength, healthy weight) and school functioning (e.g., academic outcomes) and helps establish lifelong healthy habits. Conversely, sedentary lifestyles are associated with risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and mental health problems – burdens that impose significant financial costs.

The U.S. Physical Activity Guidelines advise that preschool-aged children remain physically active throughout the day, while children, ages 6 - 17 years should engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous exercise three days per week, including aerobic, muscle-strengthening, and bone-strengthening activities. These guidelines are supported by the growing evidence suggesting physical activity among elementary and adolescent students improves mood, cognitive function, and behavior. Further, establishing lifelong healthy practices, such as physical activity early in life plays a vital role in contributing to a healthier adult (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of children engaged in physical activity declined significantly. For example, unstructured play dropped 41 percent from 2020 to 2022, and participation in school sports fell roughly eight percent among lower-income households (Aspen Institute, 2022). Today, it is estimated that only 20% -28% of 6- to 17-year-olds in the U.S. engage in 60 minutes of daily moderate-to-vigorous activity and only 18% - 20% of students with disabilities do so (Physical Activity Alliance, 2024).

While guidelines recommend 150 minutes of physical education each week for elementary students, only Oregon and Washington, DC meet this guideline. Less than half of the elementary schools across the U.S. even require physical education. Only 10 percent of states specify a minimum time for recess, and less than 10 percent require recess in elementary school. Recess often is denied as a punishment. With respect to equity of opportunity, schools with predominantly Black students are reported to have far fewer minutes of recess each week (Howie et al., 2025; Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2025; Walker et al., 2023)

The focus in this brief resource is on highlighting the impediments to schools playing an effective role in helping meet recommended standards for physical activity and strategies for overcoming the impediments.

*The material in this document builds on work done by Lexi Adelstein as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2025.

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Impediments to Schools Playing an Effective Role

Given that physical activity is essential to good development, schools are considered a natural space for engaging children in such activity. However, challenges persist when it comes to schools playing a formal role for all children in facilitating physical development.

Analysis of the literature suggests that three main themes capture the challenges:

1. Institutional/Systemic Supports

- *Policy Gaps*: Lack of consistent state, local, and federal standards for physical activity (PA).
- *Leadership*: Limited administrative prioritization of PA within school improvement plans.
- *Resource Allocation*: Insufficient funding for activities, equipment, and facilities.

2. School Staff Commitment

- *Beliefs and Attitudes*: Variability in teachers' perception of PA as integral to learning.
- *Professional Development*: Limited training on integrating PA into daily routines.
- *Agency*: Teachers often lack decision-making power in PA planning and implementation.

3. Student Motivation and Capability

- *Individual Differences*: Variations in interest, confidence, and physical ability.
- *Social/Psychological Barriers*: Particularly for students with disabilities or low motivation.
- *Equity Issues*: Disparities in access to inclusive PA opportunities.

A study by Walker and colleagues (2023) reports wide variability in implementation of physical activities due to school structure, priorities, administrative leadership, teacher preparedness, and resource availability. Examples of implementation barriers included rigid curricula, lack of administrative support, lack of district and state policies and standards, limited teacher training, under-resourced schools, reduced PE classes inconsistent program quality, and student exclusion because of disabilities or low motivation.

Overcoming Impediments

As with most decisions about schools, collaboration among key stakeholders is seen as the key to ensuring schools play a major role in facilitating physical development. Implementation at a school requires a dedicated leader, such as a principal, to guide and support staff through training and securing required resources and funding. Moreover, physical activity implementation is reported as greatest when teachers believe in the power of movement to improve academic learning and when teachers have an emotional connection to their students, the school and the community. Teachers, therefore, are seen as central to the development of PA programming and should be involved from the early stages of development (Acosta et al., 2021, Michael et al., 2018, Nathan et al., 2018, Turner et al., 2019, Walker et al., 2023)

What Might It Look Like?

For schools to play a major role in facilitating physical development, advocates call for a cultural shift toward *a whole school approach* – spanning the day from when students leave home for school, throughout classroom and non-classroom periods, and after school (Naylor et al., 2006, Walker et al., 2023).

The CDC, in collaboration with SHAPE America, provides a step-by-step guide for developing, implementing, and evaluating comprehensive school physical activity programs (<https://portal.shapeamerica.org/cspap/steps.aspx>). They propose a Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model, which includes the Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP) as a framework for planning and organizing physical activities. They describe the program as

“a multi-component approach by which school districts and schools use all opportunities for students to be physically active, meet the nationally-recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day, and develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to be physically active for a lifetime. A CSPAP reflects strong coordination and synergy across all of the components: physical education as the foundation; physical activity before, during, and after school; staff involvement; and family and community engagement.”

Keys to a Whole-School Approach

- **Explicit Policy Commitments** at district and school levels.
- **Sustained Professional Learning** for teachers and staff.
- **Cross-Curricular Collaboration** to embed movement into lessons.
- **Family and Community Partnerships** to extend activity beyond school hours.
- **Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation** to ensure quality & equity.

Equity and Inclusion

Addressing gaps requires **targeted funding, coaching, and policy safeguards** so students in under-resourced settings receive comparable opportunities. Implementation must consider:

- **Accessibility and Inclusion** for students with physical or mental health challenges.
- **Local Context Adaptation** (school size, facilities, climate, community norms).
- **Student Motivation and Psychological Safety**, recognizing that some students exhibit avoidance tendencies toward unfamiliar or risky activities. These students may need **gradual exposure, encouragement, and scaffolding** to build confidence.

Ultimately, success depends on creating a fit between students and their environment – where physical activity feels safe, meaningful, and achievable for all.

Finally, implementation raises questions about accessibility, inclusion, student diversity, and ensuring activities are physically and psychologically safe. As with all school programs, the work must be adapted to local context (e.g., school size, schedule, facilities, climate, and community norms) and individual differences in student motivation and capability. Particular attention must be given to students with physical and mental health challenges. The concept of “fit” between a student and their environment becomes crucial; when this fit is low, participation is limited regardless of physical access. Furthermore,

research on motivational dispositions in physical education highlights that students differ in their emotional responses to movement tasks. Some exhibit an "avoidance" orientation toward unfamiliar or risky activities, requiring additional encouragement, scaffolding, or gradual exposure.

One of the most compelling programs supporting PA throughout the school day is in British Columbia, Canada. In 2006, the province implemented Action Schools! BC across every elementary school, requiring they incorporate 150 minutes each week to movement activities, such as jumping jacks at the start of math class or stretching exercises before reading. The BC government supports this program with \$1.7 million annual funding that pays for 70 regional external trainers and roughly 450 workshops for teachers to learn how to incorporate movement into the full school day (Naylor et al., 2016).

Highlights from Relevant Research

- Regular exercise improves oxygen flow, neurotransmitter balance, neuroplasticity, and supports executive functions (e.g., attention, memory, self-control) which can enhance focus, behavior, and academic achievement (Buscemi et al., 2014).
- Brief physical activity breaks have been shown to improve cognitive performance, including faster response time and greater accuracy (Hillman et. al., 2015).
- Physical activity improves sleep and reduces anxiety and off-task conduct, promoting student engagement, energy, and overall improved mental wellness (Sobolewski et al., 2024).
- Findings suggest that "a small increase in the frequency of exercise among children ages 8 through 11 would also result in 340,000 fewer obese and overweight youth, a reduction of more than 4 percent. If all current 8- through 11-year-olds in the United States exercised 25 minutes a day, three times a week, the researchers suggest that \$62.3 billion in medical costs and lost wages over the course of their lifetimes could be avoided and 1.2 million fewer youths would be overweight or have obesity" (<https://www.abom.org/new-gopc-research/>).
- The strongest evidence for producing long term outcomes suggests using curriculum embedded, multi component programs delivered with teacher involvement and supported by policy.
- Based on available research and development efforts, a set of immediately actionable steps for school and district leaders have been synthesized (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention DC, 2024a,b).
- Finally, as with all school improvement initiatives, addressing equity gaps and tailoring to local context are essential.

Concluding Comments

Youngster's physical activity plays an essential in their development and behavior. And schools have a major role to play in facilitating their daily physical activity. This can take a variety of forms (e.g., formally as a physical education program and as part of in-classroom curricula, free play during recess and lunch, before/after school freeplay and organized sports).

Despite the evidence supporting benefits, schools continue to face systemic barriers and uneven implementation persists. Challenges such as policy gaps, limited resources, and disparities across schools hinder the ability to provide equitable and consistent physical activity opportunities. Addressing these impediments requires coordinated efforts among policymakers, school leaders, and community stakeholders to create sustainable, inclusive strategies that weave physical activity into the fabric of schooling.

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