

POWER OF THE QUESTION

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Five Questions State Boards Should Ask about Students' Access to Physical Education

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Students who are physically active tend to have better grades, school attendance, memory, and focus.¹ Physical activity during the school day also benefits students' physical and mental well-being. As states reel from learning loss and an ongoing youth mental health crisis, state policymakers can help balance students' physical, emotional, and cognitive development by ensuring they have access to physical education and other school-based opportunities for physical activity.

Students whose schools provide them a high-quality physical education are equipped for life to maintain their physical health and social well-being and regulate their emotions.² Physical education is the keystone of the Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP) framework, which fosters whole-child health by encouraging school districts to meet the nationally recommended 60 minutes of physical activity per day while building students' knowledge of healthy behaviors and habits.³

According to NASBE's State Policy Database on School Health, only three states require schools to provide time for physical education in elementary school in accordance with national recommendations, whereas no state requires the recommended time for physical education in middle school and high school. The pandemic had an immediate impact on students' access to physical activity and physical education due to changes in school and sports-based programs. However, when students returned to in-person learning in fall 2021, less than a quarter of high school students reported being physically active for 60 or more minutes per day.⁴ Moreover, only 19 percent attended physical education classes on all five school days in 2021, compared with 26 percent in 2019.

Although states encourage schools to meet nationally recommended standards for physical education, a recent survey of over 6,500 physical education teachers in 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia indicates that students' access to physical education in school is

severely lacking. Given the significant benefits and limited access, state policymakers can usefully apply these five questions to launch a conversation about improving access to physical education.

1 HOW DO PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROMOTE STUDENT WELL-BEING?

Regular participation in physical activity during childhood and adolescence improves the health of young people, and it influences their levels of physical activity in adulthood.⁵ It also acts as a shield against chronic health issues like obesity and heart disease, particularly as modern lifestyles become increasingly sedentary.

The near and long-term benefits cross physical, mental, and social domains.⁶ At its core, regular engagement in physical activity primes students' bodies for physical well-being. It invigorates the cardiovascular system, reinforces muscular strength and endurance, and optimizes metabolic functions.⁷ It aids mental well-being and enhances brain function. Physical activity also plays a pivotal role in shaping students' social well-being by providing opportunities for developing prosocial behaviors such as teamwork, cooperation, resilience, problem solving, communication, and leadership.⁸

Distinct in purpose from other recreational campus-based physical activity experiences, physical education offers planned, structured settings where students receive guided instruction. Such instruction during the school day can lay a foundation of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will sustain their participation.⁹ Adequate time for physical education ensures that all students have equitable opportunities to become lifelong participants in physical activity.

Students are more active when at school and when there are opportunities to be active beyond physical education classes.¹⁰ Therefore, schools should also offer all students many opportunities for physical activity so they can reap the full advantages.¹¹ Recess, active classroom learning, and out-of-schooltime physical activity programming are important times for students to apply what they learn in physical education during free play, game play, and creative movement exploration.

2 WHAT STATE POLICIES INCREASE ACCESS TO PHYSICAL EDUCATION? WHICH ONES LIMIT ACCESS?

Several state-level policies directly affect access to formal physical education. Every state and the District of Columbia have adopted physical education content standards, and most states require students to participate in physical education: 44 in elementary, 41 in

middle school, and 46 in high school.¹² Yet few also specify minutes per week of instruction time, much less meet the recommended times. The national recommendation for elementary schools (K-5) is 150 minutes per week and 225 minutes for secondary schools (grades 6-12) throughout the school year.¹³

High school physical education requirements for graduation reflect an indirect access measure, and 39 of 51 states (including the District of Columbia) require a physical education credit to graduate (map). The graduation requirement varies: 19 states require one credit (or two semesters' worth), 9 require more than one credit, and 9 require a half credit. Twelve states do not require a physical education credit to graduate. Four states have alternative graduation requirements, such as demonstrating proficiency in the curriculum offered.

Several state policies hinder the opportunity for and access to physical education further. In 31 states (62 percent), high school students can meet physical education requirements by substituting alternative activities such as JROTC, interscholastic sports, marching band, and cheerleading. Depending on their nature and implementation, policies such as these can reduce students' access to quality physical education. For example, there is evidence that students' levels of health-enhancing physical activity during JROTC coursework were almost 40 percent below those seen during physical education classes.¹⁴ Additionally, 60 percent of states allow students to be exempt from taking any physical education, and 30 percent let school districts apply for waivers from the state requirements.¹⁵

In contrast, Virginia requires high school students to complete 2.0 credits of physical education to graduate, and they may not substitute activities for these credits or apply for waivers or exemptions. Only six states require physical education to graduate and do not allow substitutions, waivers, or exemptions. This practice of requiring physical

education while also letting students forgo it is problematic because students lose the chance to gain valuable skills supporting a lifetime of physical activity and receive the message that physical education is not valuable.

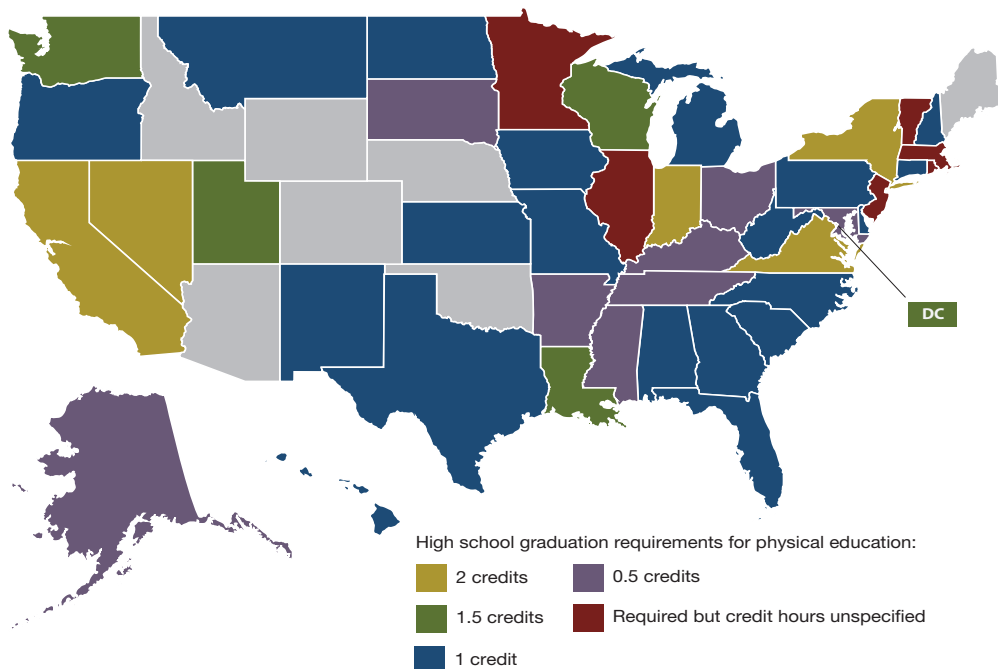
3 TO WHAT EXTENT ARE OUR SCHOOLS IMPLEMENTING STATE POLICIES ON PHYSICAL EDUCATION?

With some states mandating weekly minutes and others requiring physical education in unspecified amounts, assessing policy implementation can be challenging. For example, in some states the weekly offering of physical education was as low as 1.2 days per week,¹⁶ with some averaging less than 50 minutes per week.¹⁷ In contrast, some states offer elementary physical education more than 3.2 days per week,¹⁸ with weekly minutes averaging 110 or more.¹⁹ However, a recent survey of over 6,500 physical education teachers across 50 states and the District of Columbia reveals insights on the extent to which students are getting physical education (figure 1) and the degree to which schools are faithfully implementing state policy. The survey by Ben Kern and colleagues showed that physical education is scheduled in elementary schools on average 2.4 days per week and 3.1 days per week in middle and high schools. The average amount of weekly scheduled physical education in elementary schools was just under 97 minutes per week, with middle schools averaging 151.3 minutes per week, and high schools 178.9 minutes per week.²⁰ When these data are compared with the recommendation that schools provide 150 minutes of physical education daily in elementary and 225 minutes in secondary each week, it appears likely that in many schools physical education standards are not being met.

In most states surveyed, the duration of physical education is far below the recommended amounts but due to a lack of minimum-quantity specifications may fall within mandated policy parameters. The data are

now available in each state, and it is imperative that state boards and other policymaking bodies look critically at the extent to which physical education policy is effectively implemented across schools and districts in their states.

44 States Require a Physical Education Credit to Graduate



Source: SHAPE America, "Shape of the Nation" (Reston, VA, 2016); Ben Erwin, Daiszha Brown, and Sharmila Mann, "50-State Comparison: High School Graduation Requirements" (Education Commission of the States, 2023).

4 WHAT CHALLENGES DO SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS FACE IN PROVIDING ACCESS TO PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

While many school and district leaders may believe that physical education and physical activity are valuable to students, they likely face challenges to providing it. Since the introduction of high-stakes school accountability,

school and district leaders have been under pressure to allocate more time and resources to assessed subjects, which can reduce the resources allocated to nonassessed subjects, including physical education.²¹ In some cases, school and district leaders may schedule assessments during times usually designated for nontested subjects. Furthermore, 80 percent of states let schools withhold physical education as a consequence for poor behavior or for academic make-up, which may further decrease students' physical activity during the day.²² Some schools and districts have opted to reduce or remove recess from school schedules altogether.²³

Physical education and physical activity often require equipment or facilities that can be cost prohibitive for schools and districts, especially those working with tight budgets.²⁴ While relatively inexpensive compared with other interventions to increase physical activity in children, the equipment can require substantial upfront investments. Schools must also pay teachers to supervise recess and ask them to give up time that may otherwise be used for planning. The costs of paying teachers for supervision or for equipment may not be eligible for certain school funds depending on the rules governing their use. Moreover, the resources associated with maintaining and replacing equipment may be prohibitive for school and district leaders working with tight budgets.

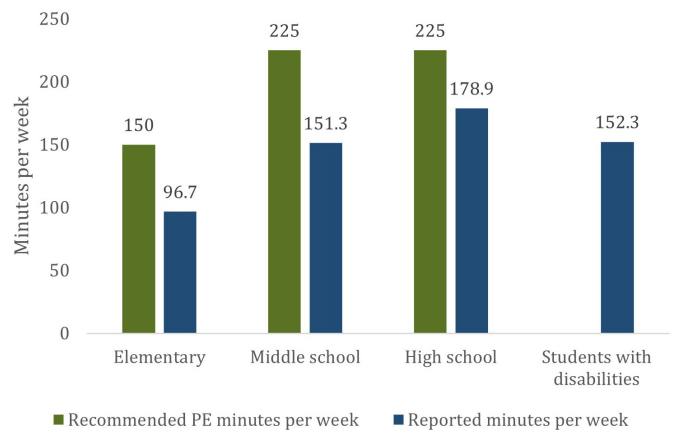
Ultimately, state boards should ask district leaders what challenges they face in ensuring consistent access to physical education and physical activity. By first identifying challenges and barriers, boards can develop strategies to create conditions more conducive to meeting standards and goals.

5 HOW ARE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES ACCESSING PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN OUR STATE?

Estimates of access to physical education for students with disabilities are rare, with national-level studies of this population even less common. The delivery of physical education instruction to students with disabilities varies markedly by state, making it difficult to paint a national picture of student access. For instance, students with disabilities may receive physical education services in a range of placements, including integration with the general population of students in physical education classes to self-contained classes with other students with disabilities to one-on-one settings.²⁵ The decision about how students access physical education is made through the individualized education program (IEP) process, which includes parents, administrators, and teachers. IEP plans differ based on disability type and severity and specific IEP objectives.²⁶ Given the individualized nature of the services for these students, it has been difficult to measure on a national scale the amount and frequency of physical education offered to them.

The national study that Ben Kern and colleagues conducted did include data on access to physical education for students with disabilities.²⁷ The results paralleled data from general physical education classes, with students with disabilities receiving on average 3.2 days per week of physical education class for an average of 152.3 minutes per week.

Figure 1. Average PE Minutes per Week Compared with National Recommendations



Because students with disabilities are not necessarily assigned specialized classes based on their grade level, the survey data were not disaggregated by grade level, making it difficult to evaluate the amount of physical education offered in elementary versus secondary settings. That said, the weekly scheduled offering of physical education for students with disabilities is less than students without disabilities in secondary schools and more than nondisabled students in elementary school. This limited quantity begs the question of whether secondary students in particular are receiving adequate physical education services, as the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act requires.

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