

Physical Education and Physical Activity are an Integral Part of the Education Process During COVID-19

Safely and effectively educating our children during the COVID-19 pandemic is requiring education systems to make many adjustments. While each community's circumstances and approach will vary, a common theme is what is best for students.

COVID-19 has illuminated the importance of prioritizing health and well-being. During this pandemic, the foundational aspect of school re-entry plans is to ensure the health and safety of students, staff, and families by implementing infection control measures. However, the health and well-being of students must be more than that. Schools need to address the stress, anxiety, trauma, and social isolation that students are experiencing.

The American Academy of Pediatrics' *COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry* states that "schools are fundamental to child and adolescent development and well-being and provide our children and adolescents with academic instruction, social and emotional skills, safety, reliable nutrition, physical/speech and mental health therapy, and opportunities for physical activity, among other benefits" and "it is also critical to maintain a balanced curriculum with continued physical education and other learning experiences rather than an exclusive emphasis on core subject areas."

The *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* recommends that children and adolescents ages 6 through 17 years participate in 60 minutes or more of physical activity daily. Extensive scientific evidence demonstrates that regular physical activity promotes growth and development in youth and has multiple benefits for physical, mental, and cognitive health.

Active Schools, a national collaborative of 90 organizations that help schools and families provide kids with movement opportunities every day, urges education decision-makers to recognize the critical importance of maintaining physical education and physical activity as an integral part of the education process during COVID-19.

- 1) Schools need to educate the whole child. CDC and ASCD's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model addresses the symbiotic relationship between learning and health and calls for greater alignment, integration, and collaboration between education and health to improve each child's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. The WSCC model highlights school health components which every school should have to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of their students, staff, and environment. One of the 10 components is Physical Education and Physical Activity.
- 2) Schools should implement a holistic and integrated approach to providing physical education and physical activity including physical education class, movement and mindfulness activities in the classroom, recess, and at-home activities. Participation is needed from all stakeholders, including physical education teachers, classroom teachers, school administrators, parents, and students.

- 3) Physical education teachers have the knowledge and skills to coordinate a holistic and integrated approach. They should be asked to provide leadership for planning physical education and physical activity in ways that adhere to COVID-19 public health practices such as physical distancing, hygiene, no shared equipment, and disinfecting equipment.
- 4) Physical education learning outcomes during COVID-19 should emphasize physical activity participation, social and emotional learning, good health, and disease prevention. These outcomes can be achieved whether learning is taking place in-person, at-home, or through a blended approach.
- 5) Physical education and physical activity should be utilized as a mechanism for social and emotional learning. School staff, such as physical education teachers, classroom teachers, and counselors, should collaborate on a schoolwide approach to social and emotional learning.

Educating and caring for our kids requires attention to their physical, mental, and cognitive health needs. While there are legitimate concerns about time lost for academic learning, kids cannot be ready to learn and academically successful if we neglect their physical and mental health. We must not be shortsighted about what our kids need during COVID-19 and always. They need to move and play and laugh. Physical education is the foundation for a physically active lifestyle and foundational for the health and well-being of our children during and after COVID-19. For school year 2020-21, the discussion must not be whether we offer physical education and other movement opportunities, it must be how to do so safely and effectively. Fortunately, excellent guidance has been developed to provide physical education and physical activity through in-person, virtual, and hybrid approaches.

“We must not be shortsighted about what our kids need during COVID-19 and always. They need to move and play and laugh. Physical education is the foundation for a physically active lifestyle and foundational for the health and well-being of our children during and after COVID-19.”

-Charlene Burgeson, Executive Director, Active Schools

SHAPE America School Reentry Resources

<https://www.shapeamerica.org/advocacy/Reentry/school-reentry-resources.aspx>

Online Physical Education Network (OPEN) Back to School 2020 Planning Tools

<https://openphysed.org/2020plan>

Kaiser Permanente Planning for the Next Normal at School: Keeping Students, Staff, Teachers, and Families Safe and Healthy Playbook

<https://thrivingschools.kaiserpermanente.org/get-inspired/coronavirus-response/schools-reopening-playbook>