



## Rebuilding K–12 Physical Education after COVID-19

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Despite its well-documented benefits, physical fitness in schools has been under fire. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, schools faced dramatic funding cuts because of federal and state pressures to prioritize academic subjects to improve student standardized test scores. Most U.S. schools failed to mandate physical fitness requirements or cite schools for failing to comply with state requirements. Before COVID-19, physical fitness in schools was hanging by a thread; after the pandemic, that thread snapped, causing significant student fitness declines and exacerbating inequalities among students. Physical fitness in schools has not bounced back like other school subjects and physical fitness test scores continue to decline.

In California, for example, the state no longer provides detailed testing data for physical fitness and instead simply marks pass or fail rates, which does not incentivize student participation. In other states, physical fitness test scores are simply not recorded by schools, so no one even knows what's going on. During COVID-19, physical fitness was not a priority. Instead, the focus was on moving core academic subjects from in-person to fully online. Physical education teachers have witnessed firsthand the consequences of pandemic disruptions, noting widespread decreases in student fitness, motivation, and increased sedentary behaviors.

### Physical Fitness in Schools is Critical to Student Success

Contrary to popular belief, the time students spend on physical fitness does not subtract from their academic performance, rather, it helps them succeed. Research shows that physical fitness in schools has been positively associated with increases in core academic subject performance, for example, in standardized test scores in reading and math.

In terms of health, physical fitness plays a vital role in overall health and well-being of school children, significantly lowering the risks associated with cardiovascular diseases, metabolic disorders, and early mortality. Regular physical activity helps prevent chronic illnesses, enhances cognitive function and brain health, supports mental well-being, and decreases the likelihood of falls and related injuries.

Physical fitness also significantly contributes to social-emotional learning (SEL) by fostering essential skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and teamwork. For instance, integrating SEL into physical education classes **has been shown to enhance students' personal and interpersonal development**, including improved teamwork, self-awareness, and creative thinking. Physical education naturally supports SEL by teaching relationship-building and self-management skills. The national standards for physical education explicitly include responsible personal and social behavior, aligning with the five core competencies of SEL: **self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness.**

### Core Challenges in Physical Education Since the Pandemic

Recent research from [California Lutheran University](#) underlines the sharp decline in physical fitness among K-12 students since the pandemic. Interviews with physical fitness teachers who taught in Southern California pre- and post-pandemic, reveal the diminished student endurance, and motivation as well as decreased institutional investment in physical activity.

**1. Substantial decline in physical fitness.**

- Students have shown reduced endurance, flexibility, and strength, alongside noticeable increases in weight gain and sedentary lifestyles.
- As one PE teacher observed: "Every year since COVID, student fitness has declined" –*Sara, PE Teacher.*

**2. Motivation and engagement crisis.**

- A profound decrease in student engagement and increased resistance to participation.
- "They don't have the motivation to try to move. They are not as mobile, and they don't feel as good" –*Trevor, PE Teacher.*

**3. Increased socioeconomic disparities.**

- Economically disadvantaged students experienced greater setbacks due to limited access to structured physical activities and nutritious food.
- "Students at or below the poverty level had the biggest struggle. These students were already at a disadvantage, and the pandemic made it worse" –*Trevor, PE Teacher.*

**4. Systemic undervaluation of physical education.**

- PE programs face insufficient administrative support and funding compared to academic subjects, hindering program effectiveness.
- "Physical education suffers from inconsistent policies and lack of administrative support. We ask for more support, but nothing changes" –*Andy, PE Teacher.*

## Policy Recommendations

**1. State education administrators must reinstate physical education as a core school subject.**

- Adopt minimum mandatory PE standards across grade levels.
- Enforce uniform participation and assessment policies.
- Example policy: [California's Physical Education Model Content Standards.](#)

**2. Federal and state administrators and policymakers must increase funding and resources.**

- Provide dedicated funding streams for updated equipment and facilities.
- Reduce PE class sizes to enable individualized attention and safer environments.
- Example initiative: [Carol M. White Physical Education Program \(PEP\).](#)

**3. School administrators must standardize and enforce participation policies.**

- Schools must implement clear, consistently enforced PE participation and dress-out policies.
- Include regular administrative oversight and training sessions for educators.

**4. Local school officials, in collaboration with local communities, must address socioeconomic disparities through community partnerships.**

- Expand access to affordable extracurricular fitness programs in disadvantaged communities.
- Collaborate with local organizations to provide free or low-cost physical activities.
- Example resource: [Active Schools Initiative.](#)

**5. School administrators must enhance institutional support and professional development.**

- Allocate funds for ongoing teacher training in innovative, evidence-based PE methods (e.g., gamified learning). An example of gamified learning in a school physical fitness class could be

creating a points-based obstacle course, where students earn badges, points, or "levels" for completing physical activities such as running, jumping, balancing, or teamwork challenges. Students can track their progress on a digital leaderboard, motivating them to set personal goals, collaborate, and remain actively engaged in physical activities.

- Support professional development opportunities for physical fitness teachers regularly by providing conference and travel funds for state and national conference attendance on physical fitness in schools.

The detrimental impact of COVID-19 on K–12 physical education necessitates urgent policy intervention. Educators and policymakers can significantly improve student health outcomes and educational equity in a post-pandemic landscape by prioritizing PE as a fundamental component of education, investing in equitable resources, and fostering community-based solutions.

**This policy brief is based on research from Dr. Da'Shay Templeton, Dr. Bree Valla, and graduate student Ruslan Korchagin. [Access the full article for free here.](#)**