

Position Statement

Physical Education Is an Academic Subject

(Updated 2015)

Position

It is SHAPE America's position that physical education is an academic subject.

For more than a century, physical education has been a fundamental part of the American public school curriculum. Physical education was first offered as a subject in U.S. schools in the early part of the 19th century. State education agency mandates for physical education instruction became common after World War I, because many young men had been found to be unfit for military service.

What Is an Academic Subject?

The U.S. Department of Education does not appear to define what constitutes an “academic subject.” However, states, school districts and schools provide a *de facto* definition by the various requirements they establish for content areas, such as math, language arts, science and history. Typically, the following characteristics are in place for all academic subjects:

1. **Required subject.** Schools are required to teach the subject and students are required to take courses in the subject.
2. **Standards.** Academic content standards that include expectations for what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade or grade groupings are approved by the state board of education.
3. **Course of study.** A course of study, curriculum framework, instructional guide or curriculum is approved by the state board of education.
4. **Textbooks/instructional resources.** Textbooks or instructional resources in the content area are approved or recommended by the state department of education.
5. **Student assessment.** Rigorous systems exist that enable teachers to assess student performance in mastering the material taught in subject courses.
6. **Grades.** Students receive grades that document the extent to which they have mastered the material taught in subject courses.
7. **Teacher-preparation program accreditation.** The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) reviews how institutions of higher education prepare future teachers of the subject as part of its performance-based accreditation system.

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8. **Teacher certification.** State law requires teachers of the content area to meet specific certification, education and licensing requirements.

Why Physical Education Is an Academic Subject

Physical education is an academic subject because states, school districts and schools apply all of those requirements to physical education, as detailed in the following list.

1. Required subject

- a. As of 2012, 43 states mandated that students must take physical education in elementary school, 41 states mandated it for middle school, and 44 states mandated it for high school (SHAPE America, 2012).
- b. Most schools — 78.3 percent of elementary schools, 72 percent of middle schools and 79.8 percent of high schools — specify time requirements for physical education instruction (CDC, 2013).

2. Standards

- a. SHAPE America's *National Standards & Grade-Level Outcomes for K-12 Physical Education* (2014) identifies the knowledge and skills essential to developing physically literate individuals who have the knowledge, skills and confidence to enjoy a lifetime of healthful physical activity. Most state physical education standards are based on SHAPE America's national standards.
- b. As of 2014, 49 states had adopted standards for physical education that identify what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade or grade grouping as a result of participation in physical education.
- c. Most state education departments maintain websites that list the state's standards for academic subjects such as math, language arts, science, history and physical education. For example, under the heading "Colorado K-12 Academic Standards," the Colorado Department of Education provides links to model content standards for: civics, dance, economics, foreign language, geography, history, mathematics, music, physical education, reading and writing, science, theater and visual arts.
- d. Some 86.1 percent of the nation's school districts have adopted a policy stating that schools will follow national, state or district standards or guidelines for physical education (CDC, 2013).

3. Course of study

Many states have an approved course of study, curriculum framework, instructional guide or curriculum for physical education that has been approved by the state board of education.

Examples include:

- [California Physical Education Framework for California Public Schools, K-12](#)
- [Arkansas Physical Education Curriculum Framework, Grades 9-12](#)
- [Tennessee Health, Physical Education and Wellness Standards](#)

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- [Connecticut Physical Education K-12 Guide to Program Development](#)
- [Alabama Physical Education Course of Study](#)

4. Textbooks/instructional resources

A number of states have included lists of approved or recommended textbooks, and they typically include materials for physical education courses. For example, the Oregon Department of Education's website (www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=1565) lists textbooks recommended by the Oregon Board of Education in the following content areas: the arts, English as a second language, English/language arts, health education, physical education, French, German, Spanish, mathematics, science and social science.

5. Student assessment

Like teachers of other academic subjects, physical education teachers have access to state-of-the-art resources and tools to help them assess student performance in their courses. For example:

- SHAPE America's *PE Metrics*[®] includes tools to assess student knowledge, skills and behaviors; determine the impact of physical education programs on students' achievement of the national standards; and track progress in student achievement of the standards over time.
- South Carolina mandates the use of materials developed by the state's department of education for teachers to assess student proficiency in physical education. State law calls for data on the percentage of students proficient in physical education at each school to be included in "report cards" for schools issued by the state department of education.

6. Grades

As of 2006, 98.1 percent of the schools that required students to take physical education gave them a grade for the class, and more than three-quarters of those schools gave letter or numerical grades (CDC, 2006).

7. Teacher-preparation program accreditation

CAEP reviews physical education teacher education programs in institutions of higher education as part of its system of accreditation for teacher-preparation programs.

8. Teacher certification

As of 2012, 40 states required everyone who teaches physical education in elementary schools to be certified or licensed, 42 states required that for all who teach physical education in middle schools, and 46 states required it for all who teach physical education in high schools (SHAPE America, 2012). In addition, 37 states required participation in ongoing professional development to maintain certification/licensure as a physical education teacher (SHAPE America, 2012).

Physical Education as a Core Academic Subject

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 identified the following subject areas as “core academic subjects”: English, reading or language arts, math, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography. The exclusion of physical education sent the strong message to state and local school boards and education policymakers that the federal government viewed physical education as a marginal subject.

(Note: As of summer 2015, Congress was considering legislation that would replace No Child Left Behind with a reauthorized and renewed Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). At least one of the ESEA proposals that Congress was considering would designate physical education as a core academic subject.)

Many physical education advocates say that the failure of No Child Left Behind to include physical education as a core academic subject encouraged a narrowing of the school curriculum and has given many school boards the incentive (and political cover) to reduce or eliminate requirements for students to participate in physical education classes. The resulting reduction in physical education instruction time over the past 10-plus years has complicated efforts to address the childhood obesity epidemic and other serious health problems facing young people.

Meanwhile, Congress and the Obama administration have proposed eliminating dedicated funding for the Carol M. White Physical Education Program (PEP), the only stream of federal funding devoted to improving the quality of physical education. Under those proposals, PEP funds would be consolidated with some other funding streams that address school safety, counseling and mental health in addition to physical health and wellness. Physical education grant seekers, then, would have to compete with those other programs for funding.

To make matters worse, the U.S. Department of Education includes physical education and some other wellness concepts in the definition of school climate, along with violence and substance-use prevention and efforts to provide social and emotional support for students. Given the opportunity to address these other issues, it is highly unlikely that schools will choose to focus their school-climate efforts on improving physical education if it is not identified as an important academic subject.

Finally, failure to include physical education among the academic subjects that are part of a well-rounded education will completely undermine the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity’s recommendation to increase “the quality and frequency of sequential, age- and developmentally appropriate physical education for all students, taught by certified physical education teachers” (White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, 2010).

SHAPE America Policy Recommendations

SHAPE America calls on the U.S. Congress and state legislatures to designate physical education as a core academic subject as a way to ensure that all U.S. students are provided with effective instruction and a well-rounded education. In addition, SHAPE America supports the continued, stand-alone funding and authorization of PEP grants so that school districts have access to the necessary funding to support innovative physical education programs for all students.

Suggested Citation

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