



Physical Education Professionals Play a Key Role in Promoting Physical Activity in U.S. Elementary Schools

bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices for Healthy Youth

Research Brief
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Introduction

Regular physical activity (PA) benefits kids' health and academic outcomes. Experts agree that providing opportunities for students to be active at school is essential for learning and important for helping kids meet the 60 minutes of recommended daily PA.^{1,2} Quality physical education (PE) is key to school-based PA because it helps children and teens accumulate more PA at school and also, importantly, because it helps them to acquire knowledge and skills

that can help them stay active for a lifetime. One approach for increasing school-based PA that has been promoted by several national organizations involves developing a comprehensive school physical activity program,^{1,3,4} which includes: (a) quality PE; (b) PA during school; (c) PA before and after school; (d) staff involvement; and (e) family and community involvement.

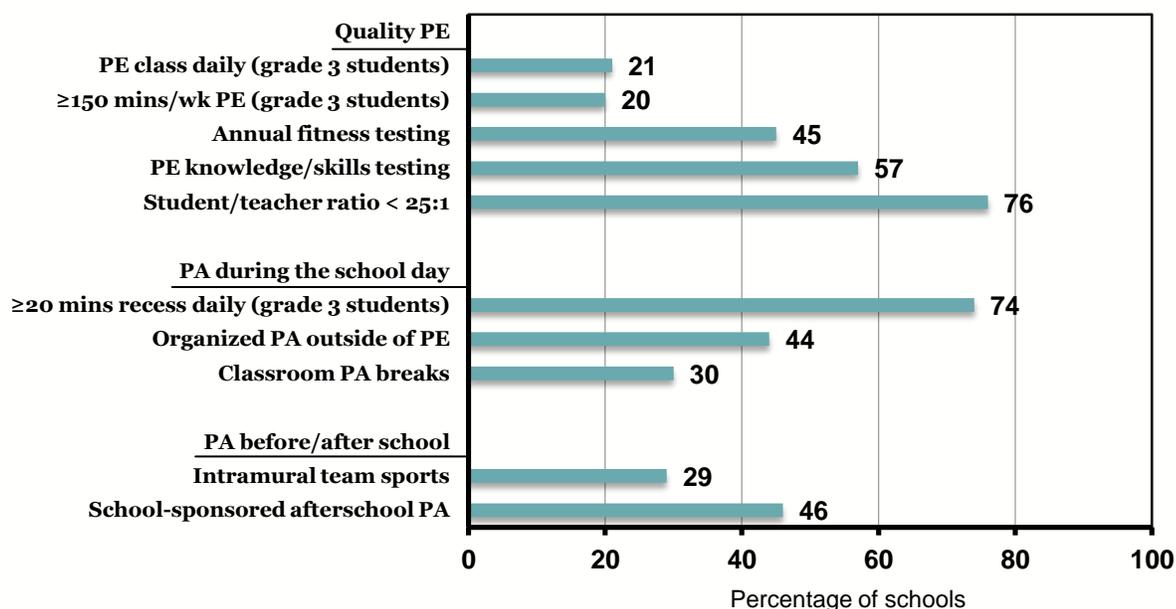
This brief summarizes nationally-representative surveys of administrators at U.S. public elementary schools between the 2009–10 and 2011–12 school years regarding three elements of comprehensive school physical activity programs: quality PE, PA during school, and PA before and after school. Associations among these practices and school PE staffing, as well as requirements for PE staff to obtain continuing education, also are examined. Additional details about the *Bridging the Gap* surveys are available in a technical report⁵ and in previously-published research.⁶

Key Findings: PE and PA Practices

There is significant room for improvement with respect to implementing additional best-practices for PE and PA.

- Only 21 percent of elementary schools in the U.S. offer PE daily, and only 20 percent meet the SHAPE America standard of at least 150 minutes of PE per week.
- Nearly three in four schools (74%) provide students with at least 20 minutes of recess each day.

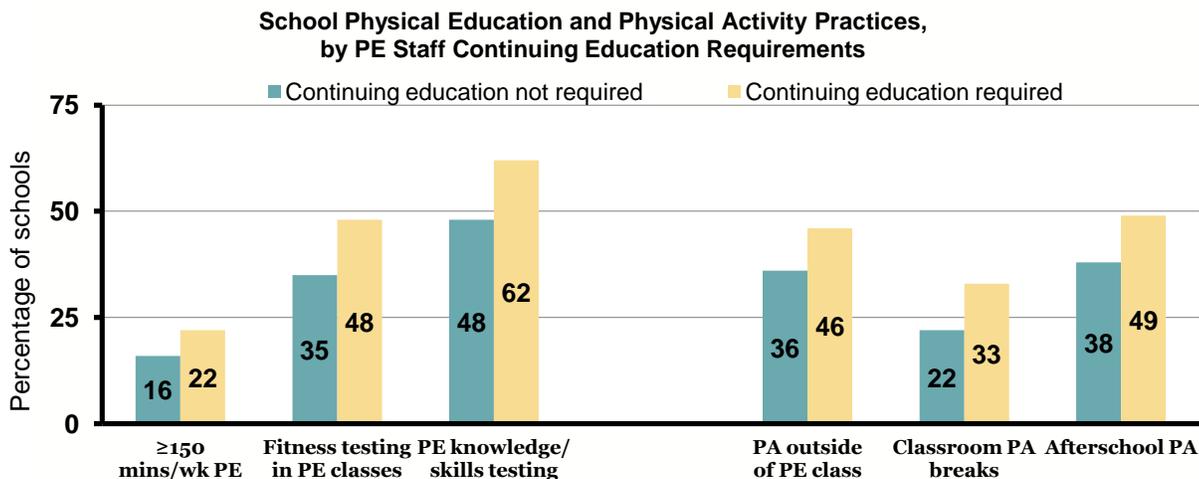
Prevalence of School PE and PA Practices, 2009-10 to 2011-12 School Years



Key Findings: PE Training Requirements

The figure below shows the prevalence of PE and PA practices in schools where continuing education is required for PE teachers compared with schools where it is not required. Estimates are adjusted for school characteristics and all comparisons are statistically significant. When PE teachers are required to obtain continuing education:

- Schools are more likely to offer at least 150 minutes per week of PE.
- Schools are more likely to provide fitness testing in PE classes and test students' PE knowledge and/or skills.
- Other PA opportunities both during and after the school day—such as classroom PA breaks and afterschool PA—are more likely to be available to students.



Conclusions and Policy Implications

Opportunities for students to be physically active in U.S. elementary schools are critical for health and learning, but many students are missing out. Schools should strongly consider executing strategies developed by SHAPE America and other organizations focused on physical activity that aim to establish comprehensive school PA programs. For example, SHAPE America recommends training PE professionals as district-level or school-level physical activity directors, who can implement quality PE; create opportunities for PA before, during, and after school; and ensure that staff, families, and community members are involved in the process. Our results illustrate important gains in students' PA opportunities associated with schools' hiring and supporting PE professionals as key school-level staff. Given the importance of regular PA for children's health and academic outcomes, it is essential that—even in times of strained financial resources—PE be considered a core subject area, PE and PA be written into district wellness plans, and that school boards and district administrators prioritize and provide resources for PE and PA programming.

This research brief is based on a study supported by Bridging the Gap, published in *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* in November 2014⁶ by Lindsey Turner and Tyler Johnson (Boise State University) and Sandy Slater and Frank Chaloupka (University of Illinois at Chicago).

Endnotes

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- Turner L, Chaloupka FJ. Bridging the Gap's Food and Fitness elementary school survey: technical report on survey development, sampling, and methodology. http://bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/34zbxw/BTG_Food_Fitness_ES_survey_methodology_Apr_2015.pdf
- Turner L, Johnson TJ, Slater SJ, Chaloupka FJ. Physical activity practices in elementary schools and associations with physical education staffing and training. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*. 2014;85:488-501.

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Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors affect diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org and follow us on Twitter: [@BTGResearch](https://twitter.com/BTGResearch).