

What comprises physical activity practice and culture in schools?

What makes physical activity practice and culture in schools may appear obvious - but actually there are a variety of ways in which a school can improve, or fail to provide, when it comes to ensuring pupils and staff are encouraged to be physically active. All schools have different circumstances, so it's important to remember that despite fears about lack of resources or time in the curriculum these are all opportunities to make positive change. Every small change will contribute to cultural shift when they add up.

P.E.

For many pupils this is a compulsory part of the curriculum, but usually equates to just two hours per week. This is the government recommended minimum in both England and Wales, and the quality of both facilities and teaching can vary. Sports premium funding is available to primary schools in England, including a rollover of funds not used due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is ring-fenced for improving P.E. and sports provision.

Sport

What sports are provided at a school will largely be determined by the facilities available, either organic or communal, and the availability of suitable staff to organise and coach them. Modern sporting amenities often require significant investment, with even grass pitches requiring constant maintenance on top of the purchase/asset cost of the land. However, there are opportunities to turn these into community assets and revenue sources outside of school hours. It's also possible for schools to develop relationships with local sports clubs as an avenue for pupils to play sports they might not be able to access through the school itself.

Break time/playtime

A perfect opportunity for pupils to get active, socialise, and burn off some energy - in fact, free play has been shown to burn more calories in children than almost any other activity, including organised sports. But there are ways to ensure more pupils are making the most of this time. What space is available to pupils, particularly when the weather is poor? What facilities and equipment are provided to allow pupils to get active in different ways? Is there supervision, and if so, has the supervisor had any training in how to encourage active play?

Extra-curricular clubs/activities

Beyond organised sport and P.E., many schools offer clubs and societies that promote physical activity. Martial arts, yoga, dance, climbing, and cycling are some examples that are often relatively easy and cheap to set up. Adding these activities as options and gives more choice to pupils who might be less-inclined to competitive or team sports.



Active travel

Students making their own way to school is an ideal way to introduce more activity to their lives. It's free, reduces the congestion and pollution associated with drop off by car, and eases the burden on parents. Schools can work with local councils to make routes as safe as possible, ensure they have suitable facilities to encourage active travel, such as bicycle racks, as well as engage with parents on when and how their children can actively travel to school.

Active classrooms

There is increasing evidence of the benefits of incorporating movement into the classroom itself. Children and young people are more engaged and able to concentrate for longer whilst contributing to their daily activity levels. Active classrooms involve using activity breaks within and between lessons, incorporating movement into the lesson, making use of standing desks, the floor and yoga balls, and learning outdoors. It requires some thought and creativity to implement, as well as potentially changes to the design and layout of classrooms, but it can improve behaviour and learning outcomes whilst underpinning a physically active culture in the school.



Home-life

Students need to be educated on the negative consequences of a sedentary life outside of school. The good work at school can be undone if their time at home revolves around sitting still. Schools should engage with parents in supporting their children to stay active, particularly on weekends and during holidays, and to ensure the messaging pupils receive is consistent.

Community engagement

There are numerous opportunities for schools to bolster and reinforce a physically active culture by working with their local community. This begins with ensuring staff are included in the school's programme, and planning and encouraging them to look after themselves physically. Parents and families should be included too, not only when their help and support is required in fundraising through the PTA or as volunteers for events, but as active participants in this culture. Parental involvement in coaching/instructing, family fun runs, parents versus students matches – all of these can help build cohesion within the wider school. They can help positively position it within the wider community, all while continuing to strengthen the messaging around physical activity. As alluded to previously, there are often many opportunities to work with local organisations to broaden the sporting and extra-curricular opportunities for students, and many of them would be keen to gain new members.

Whilst this list is not exhaustive it does demonstrate that there is more to building a comprehensive programme for engaging with all students on the issue. Similarly, there are a wide range of opportunities for schools to improve their provision and ethos.

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