

Physical Activity in Schools: Policy Recommendations

Background and Rationale

Developing and implementing healthy school policy specific to physical activity (PA) supports high quality education in Alberta. Physical activity is linked to good health and is also recognized for a range of benefits for students – from improving attention, focus and behaviour, to boosting academic success¹.

Physical activity policy helps to shape the culture of a school community by defining its values, acceptable standards and expected actions. It also lays the groundwork for clear communication, accountability and sustainability.

Since September 2005, Alberta Education has supported PA through its Daily Physical Activity (DPA) Initiative. It sets a minimum standard for PA policy, requiring that school jurisdictions ensure all students in grades 1 through 9 are physically active for a minimum of 30 minutes per day through activities organized by the school². Implementation of the DPA Initiative is guided by *Daily Physical Activity: A Handbook for Grades 1–9 Schools*; it suggests that school jurisdictions develop policies that provide direction and support for the implementation of DPA in each school³.

Evidence suggests that PA policy should expand beyond DPA and curriculum-based physical education to promote active living throughout the school community^{4–8}.

This document is intended to guide Alberta school jurisdictions and/or individual schools in developing comprehensive and evidence-informed PA policy. It outlines strategies that are consistently identified by researchers and practitioners as best practices in PA policy.

While the most comprehensive jurisdiction and/or school-based PA policy incorporates all best



Glossary of Terms

Physical activity: Any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscle that results in energy expenditure, and increases heart rate and breathing⁹.

Physical literacy: The motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life¹⁰.

practices, it is important that PA policy be realistic and achievable. It may be necessary to tailor to local context and capacity. Developing and implementing healthy school policy^a is most effective when it:

- aligns with overarching school jurisdiction policies around student health and well-being and/or the comprehensive school health framework^b
- involves opportunities for all members of the school community to engage in policy development, implementation and regular review, often through a health committee, council or network
- incorporates specific language to set clear expectations and identify mechanisms for implementation and monitoring

^a For more information about developing and implementing healthy school policies visit <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page7124.aspx>

^b For more information about the comprehensive school health approach visit <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/csh.aspx>

Recommended Strategies

Supportive culture

Effective PA policy recognizes PA as a normative and valuable part of the school day. PA policy should:

- State the minimum amount of time the school jurisdiction is committed to providing for PA within instructional time, beyond the minimum standard set by the DPA Initiative.
- Call on schools to embed PA within timetables, and state that it cannot be disrupted or cancelled to accommodate more academic pursuits and/or special events.
- Define expectations around teacher support for participation in PA; for example, require teachers to role model and participate alongside students, when feasible.

Tip: Strong PA policy makes specific reference to moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), heart-pumping activities like jogging, aerobic dance and jumping rope. The *Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth* call for 5 to 17-year olds to achieve 60 minutes of daily MVPA. PA policy can support students in the accrual of MVPA by setting specific targets, for example, by requiring that at least 50% of all PA at school involves MVPA.

Resources

[Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth](#)

Healthy environments

The guiding principles of Alberta Education's DPA Initiative reinforce the role of the school in creating safe, respectful, inclusive and enjoyable learning environments for all students. PA policy should:

- State that schools must ensure a variety of PA opportunities are available for all students — not just the most athletic or active ones — and that schools must use both indoor and outdoor environments for PA, in all seasons.
- Require that schools provide opportunities to allow for student choice.
- Call for the use of resources to enhance PA participation:
 - *Daily Physical Activity: A Handbook for Grades 1-9 Schools* or *Creating a Desire to Participate Video*
 - professional learning opportunities and resources related to supporting physical literacy at school

Resources

[Guiding Principles of DPA](#)

[Daily Physical Activity: A Handbook for Grades 1-9 Schools](#)

[Creating a Desire to Participate Video](#)

[Active for Life](#)

[Be Fit for Life](#)

[Ever Active Schools](#)

[PHE Canada](#)

[Sport for Life](#)

Cross-curricular approaches

Research suggests that embedding PA within instructional time does not compromise, and may even improve, academic performance¹. Effective PA policy recognizes the value of movement-based and kinesthetic teaching approaches, and calls for PA to be integrated into core subject areas (e.g., math, science, language arts). PA policy should:

- Set clear expectations that teachers work across curricula to incorporate PA and movement-based teaching approaches into all subject areas.
- Support activity-permissive school and/or classroom design, including the use of alternative seating to minimize sitting (e.g., standing desks or workstations, stools).
- Require that field trips involve active transportation (e.g., walking or cycling), when feasible.

Active recess

Effective PA policy recognizes that recess provides an important opportunity for students to move and play and to find joy in the activity of their choosing¹¹. PA policy should:

- State that recess cannot be withheld for punitive or academic reasons, or due to event scheduling.
- Call on schools to offer recess before lunch, where possible.
- Provide clear expectations for active indoor recess, with a focus on offering alternatives to sedentary screen time.

Tip: Students' level of MVPA during recess can be increased through simple, low cost strategies, such as: playground markings, like painted lines on playground tarmac surfaces; access to and availability of loose equipment such as hula hoops, skipping ropes, balls, toboggans and snow shovels; organized games, led by recess supervisors and/or student leaders; professional development for recess supervisors¹².

Resources

[Reverse Lunch Toolkit: Play Before Lunch
Move and Play at Recess](#)

Movement breaks

Movement breaks are short (<10 minute) periods of PA embedded within instructional time. Examples include energizers, games, dance, breathing/calming exercises and stretching. PA policy should:

- Provide clear expectations around the use of movement breaks; for example, require one movement break for every 40–60 minutes of academic instruction.
- State that students must avoid extended periods of sitting or limited activity at school, including sedentary screen time.
- Require that whole-school events such as morning announcements and assemblies incorporate movement breaks, when feasible.

Active living

Effective PA policy seeks to proactively extend opportunities for PA beyond the school day, and recognizes the important role of parents, community members and partners in supporting active living. PA policy should:

- Formalize processes through which schools may enter into joint use agreements or memoranda of understanding to make school facilities and grounds available for community-based PA outside of the school day, and/or to improve students' opportunities to access local sport and recreation facilities.
- Provide clear expectations for PA within school-based student clubs, extra-curricular activities, intramural programs, before-and-after-school care programs and summer learning programs.
- Call on schools to incorporate information and resources about PA in communications to parents (e.g., newsletters, website updates, bulletin boards).
- Support active transportation to school (e.g., walking or cycling), by encouraging participation in annual events, such as International Walk to School Week, Winter Walk Day and Wheel Week.

Resources

[SHAPE Alberta](#)

Sources

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