



## DECISIONS TO ACT:

### Investing In Physical Activity to Enhance Learning & Health

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## THE ISSUE

Every child deserves to lead a healthy, productive life. Research shows that health and education are connected—healthy students achieve more in school, and more education leads to a healthier, longer life. School-based physical activity (PA), including physical education (PE) has been linked with multiple learning and health benefits, including improved brain function, academic performance, heart health and body weight. Current US guidelines recommend that children engage in at least one hour of PA each day, but most do not. Schools can play a critically important role in this regard, yet few schools provide students the minimum recommended amount of daily PA. We have limited knowledge about how schools, especially low-resourced schools, focus on and implement strategies to help children be active. This study investigated why and how a group of PA-supportive elementary schools prioritize and implement PA strategies to help students reach the minimum recommended amount of daily PA.

## RESULTS

The main reason schools make PA a priority is because PA helps advance learning and health goals. The study participants mentioned they know from research and from direct experience (e.g., as teachers, principals) that PA can yield multiple learning-related benefits, including better focus in class and improved test scores. Additionally, PA is seen as a strategy to help reduce obesity and inactivity, improve physical, mental and behavioral health, and social and emotional learning. One respondent shared *“You got to exercise their brains!”*

A number of critical factors enable schools to strategize and put PA activities into action.

- **Policies and standards for PA and PE reinforce** the importance of PA. Policies and standards also help advocates justify the reasons for the need to implement and maintain PA strategies.
- **A culture of learning and health** that considers PA as integral to learning and health. Schools create this culture, in part, by promoting the value of PA across stakeholders and shifting the frame of mind so PA is seen as part of the education rather than as competing against the academic agenda. A participant summarized this by sharing: *“It’s all about building a culture in your school. That it’s not just the PE teacher’s job to keep the students active; it’s everybody’s job and...it benefits everybody...it’s a really big piece.”*
- **Acceptance that PA adds value.** It is very important to get “buy-in” for PA among stakeholders and decision-makers who have the authority to integrate PA strategies throughout the school day. **PA advocates including students, staff, administrators and parents, also play a key role** in influencing and educating decision makers about the benefits of daily PA and the critical role schools play in promoting it.

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*“The bottom line is that you have to have PE teachers or somebody in the school that is going to promote (PA). Whether it is a parent or principal or staff member, it has to come from the passion of the people that work there.”*

Making physical activity an everyday  
experience for all children

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- **Funding and resources often drive decisions** to put PA strategies in practice. Participants noted there is limited funding for PA/PE, yet funding is important in deciding what PA strategies are implemented. Participants often sought out external grants. Aside from funding, other resources are also important; these included education on the benefits of PA, best practices and technical assistance from local and national organizations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The results offer critical insights for policy and decision-makers to increase PA and PE in schools across the nation.

- Policymakers can strengthen policies regarding PA/PE by including requirements for funding allocations, guidelines for implementation and compliance measures.
- Everyone, including policymakers, advocates, schools and school districts, should create and foster a culture of learning and health that embraces the multiple benefits of PA.
- Funding agencies can offer grants and technical assistance to support grant writing for low-resourced schools.
- Schools and school districts can foster collaboration and networking. This includes ensuring that time and resources are available, such as professional development opportunities and conferences related to PA, for staff and community members to share ideas and use resources effectively.

## METHODOLOGY

The study focused primarily on elementary schools that prioritize and put into practice multiple PA strategies to support students to reach or approach the daily minimum recommended minutes of moderate to vigorous PA. We used several recruitment strategies, including referrals, outreach to professional networks, internet searches and direct contacts to schools and school districts. We attempted to include schools that are located in different states and that serve students with different sociodemographic characteristics. The results of the study are based on interviews and online surveys from 42 key informants from schools in 17 states plus the District of Columbia. We analyzed the content of the telephone interview data and identified themes that recurred across interview responses, cross-checking and validating the themes with supporting evidence from direct quotes. The full report, which include citations, is available at: <https://paresearchcenter.org/project-profiles/san-francisco-state-university/>

