A WHOLE-OF-SCHOOL APPROACH TO PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AMONG STUDENTS

Karim Mahramov
Lecturer, Department of Physical Culture, Asia International University
mahramovkarim9@gmail.com

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Abstract. Schools influence physical activity through curriculum, timetables, facilities, transport, recess, extracurricular opportunities, staff behavior, and relationships with families and communities. A whole-of-school approach coordinates these elements instead of relying only on physical education lessons or isolated events. This review explains the components of comprehensive school physical activity promotion and examines implementation, equity, leadership, evaluation, and sustainability. Quality physical education remains the educational foundation, while active classrooms, active recess, extracurricular programs, active transport, and family-community partnerships expand opportunities across the day. Successful implementation requires leadership support, student voice, staff development, realistic goals, and attention to groups who participate less. Evaluation should include not only activity levels but also reach, enjoyment, inclusion, competence, safety, and organizational change. The review concludes that coordinated approaches are more likely to influence school culture than short-term campaigns, but they must be adapted to local resources and protected from becoming an additional burden placed solely on physical education teachers.

Introduction.

Young people spend a substantial proportion of their waking hours within the school environment. For this reason, schools influence students' physical activity not only through formal physical education lessons but also through classroom routines, break periods, travel to and from school, access to facilities, extracurricular programs, and the wider culture surrounding movement. Daily school structures can either create regular opportunities for activity or reinforce long periods of sitting and

inactivity. Physical education remains a central part of school-based activity promotion, but its impact is limited when it operates in isolation. Students may participate actively during PE while spending the rest of the school day seated. Similarly, a school may organize an annual sports festival or special activity day, yet these isolated events rarely produce lasting changes in behavior. They can attract attention and generate short-term enthusiasm, but sustained participation requires regular and coordinated opportunities. A whole-of-school approach responds to this challenge by connecting policy, curriculum, environment, staff practices, student participation, family engagement, and community partnerships. Rather than treating physical activity as the responsibility of the PE department alone, it recognizes movement as a shared educational and institutional priority. School leaders, classroom teachers, support staff, families, and local organizations all contribute to the conditions that shape student activity [1].

Policy is an important foundation. Schools need clear expectations regarding physical education time, active breaks, use of facilities, extracurricular access, and participation opportunities. Leadership support can help protect PE from being replaced by other subjects and can ensure that movement is considered in scheduling, budgeting, and school improvement planning. Without institutional commitment, activity initiatives may depend too heavily on individual teachers and disappear when staffing changes. The curriculum should also support activity beyond PE. Classroom teachers may include brief movement breaks, physically active learning tasks, or opportunities to change posture during long lessons. These practices do not replace PE, but they can reduce uninterrupted sitting and reinforce the idea that movement is a normal part of the school day. Break periods should also provide sufficient time, space, equipment, and supervision for active participation. The physical environment strongly influences behavior. Safe playgrounds, accessible sports areas, open facilities, shaded outdoor spaces, bicycle storage, and clearly marked activity zones can make movement easier and more attractive. In contrast, restricted access, poor maintenance, overcrowding, or lack of equipment can discourage participation. Environmental design should therefore be considered an educational issue rather than only a matter of infrastructure [2].

Active travel is another important component. Walking, cycling, or using combined transport routes can add regular movement to daily routines. However, these options depend on distance, traffic safety, family circumstances, weather, and neighborhood conditions. Schools may support active travel through safe-route planning, bicycle facilities, supervised walking groups, and cooperation with local authorities. Extracurricular opportunities can extend participation before school, after school, and during lunch periods. These programs should include more than competitive teams. Recreational games, dance, fitness, walking groups, adapted activities, and student-led clubs can reach learners with different interests and confidence levels. Offering varied choices is important because traditional sport programs may attract students who are already active while excluding those who need support most. Student voice should be included in planning. Learners can identify barriers, suggest preferred activities, evaluate existing programs, and help create a

more relevant movement culture. Their participation may also increase ownership and improve the likelihood that activities reflect real interests rather than adult assumptions.

Families and community partners can strengthen continuity between school and everyday life. Local sports clubs, health services, municipalities, recreation centers, and youth organizations may provide facilities, expertise, transport, or additional opportunities. Family communication can also encourage supportive routines, although schools should avoid assuming that all families have equal time, resources, or knowledge. Equity must remain central to implementation. Students differ in disability, confidence, cultural background, financial resources, transport access, and previous sport experience. A whole-of-school approach should therefore remove participation fees where possible, provide equipment, ensure accessible facilities, offer adapted activities, and avoid relying only on competitive formats. Equal opportunity requires attention to the barriers faced by different groups. Implementation should be gradual, coordinated, and realistic. Schools need clear responsibilities, staff development, student consultation, and consistent leadership. Programs should be integrated into existing routines rather than added as temporary projects. Small but regular changes are often more sustainable than ambitious initiatives that cannot be maintained.

Core Components

Quality PE is the foundation because it provides planned learning. It develops skills, knowledge, confidence, and motivation rather than merely offering activity time. Active classroom approaches include short movement breaks, standing tasks, and physically active learning. These can reduce prolonged sitting, although they should not replace PE. Recess and lunch periods provide informal opportunities. Accessible equipment, marked spaces, inclusive games, and student leadership can improve participation. Overly restrictive rules may unintentionally reduce movement. Extracurricular clubs and intramural programs broaden choice. They should include recreational and beginner-friendly options, not only competitive teams. Active transport initiatives support walking or cycling where infrastructure and safety allow. Family and municipal cooperation is often necessary. Community partnerships can expand facilities, coaching, and pathways for continued participation. Agreements should protect child safety and affordability [3].

Table 1.

Components of a whole-of-school physical activity approach

Component	Main purpose	Example
Physical education	Develop physical literacy	Inclusive curriculum
Active classrooms	Reduce prolonged sitting	Movement breaks
Active recess	Increase informal activity	Equipment zones
Extracurricular activity	Broaden participation	Recreational clubs

Active transport	Integrate daily movement	Walking groups
Community partnership	Extend opportunities	Shared facilities

Leadership and Implementation

Leadership commitment is essential because scheduling, staffing, facilities, and policy require administrative decisions. A cross-school committee can distribute responsibility among PE staff, classroom teachers, health personnel, students, and parents. Schools should begin with an assessment of current opportunities and barriers. Student voice is important because adults may misjudge why certain groups avoid activities. Goals should be specific and achievable. For example, a school may first improve active recess in one age group, then expand. Pilot testing helps identify practical problems. Staff development can reduce the perception that activity promotion requires specialist coaching. Classroom teachers need simple, safe routines and clarity about their role [4].

Equity and Inclusion

Whole-school programs can widen inequalities if the most confident students capture new opportunities. Participation data should be examined by gender, disability, age, socioeconomic background, and other relevant characteristics. Activities should include different intensity levels, cultural forms, and social formats. Quiet spaces and lower-pressure options may support students who dislike competitive environments. Cost, clothing, transport, and equipment can be hidden barriers. Programs should avoid depending on personal devices or fees. Students with disabilities should be involved in planning, and accessibility should be considered across facilities, communication, and staffing.

Evaluation and Sustainability

Evaluation should examine implementation as well as outcomes. A program may fail because it was not delivered consistently rather than because the idea was ineffective. Useful indicators include reach, frequency, active time, enjoyment, competence, attendance, safety incidents, and student perceptions. Device data can be useful but should not be the only evidence. Sustainability improves when activities are embedded in schedules, job roles, budgets, and policy. Dependence on one enthusiastic staff member creates vulnerability. Recognition and communication can maintain support, but schools should avoid exaggerated claims. Small, sustained changes may be more valuable than short campaigns. Communication should present physical activity as part of learning and well-being rather than as a response to weight. Weight-centered messages may stigmatize students and reduce participation. A strengths-based approach emphasizes energy, concentration, friendship, skill, independence, and enjoyment.

Discussion and Practical Implications

From a curriculum perspective, the topic should be connected with explicit learning outcomes rather than treated as an occasional enrichment activity. Teachers need to identify what students should know, perform, explain, or evaluate after the

learning sequence. This alignment helps prevent attractive activities from becoming disconnected from physical literacy, health understanding, or responsible participation. Implementation should proceed gradually and include student feedback. A small-scale trial allows teachers to observe participation patterns, technical or organizational difficulties, and unintended exclusion. Students can explain which features support confidence and which create pressure. Their perspectives are especially important because engagement may differ according to prior experience, gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and confidence.

Professional learning is another requirement. Teachers need opportunities to examine practical examples, plan adaptations, and discuss ethical dilemmas with colleagues. One-time technical training is rarely sufficient. Sustainable change is more likely when schools provide time for collaborative planning, access to support, and freedom to modify approaches according to local conditions. Future research should move beyond short interventions and self-reported enjoyment. Longer studies are needed to examine learning retention, transfer to out-of-school behavior, inclusion, teacher workload, and possible negative effects. Mixed-method designs can combine activity or performance data with interviews and observations, providing a fuller understanding of how and why an approach works for different learners [5].

Recommendations for Schools and Teachers

At school level, implementation should be supported by written principles that clarify educational purpose, responsibility, safety, accessibility, and evaluation. These principles do not need to be complex, but they should prevent inconsistent practice between classes and ensure that innovations remain connected to curriculum expectations. Teachers should prepare alternative pathways before the lesson. Equipment failure, student discomfort, injury, limited space, or unequal access should not stop participation. A well-planned alternative can address the same objective through different materials, roles, or levels of challenge, protecting both inclusion and instructional time. Assessment should combine several sources of evidence. Observation, student explanation, reflection, peer interaction, and performance can reveal different dimensions of learning. Reliance on a single score may conceal progress and disadvantage students whose strengths are not captured by standardized measures. Finally, the value of any approach should be judged by its effect on the least engaged students as well as on the class average. An intervention that raises overall participation while increasing embarrassment or exclusion for a smaller group cannot be considered fully successful. Equity, dignity, and meaningful learning should remain central criteria.

Conclusion

A whole-of-school approach expands opportunities for physical activity across the entire school day rather than limiting movement to scheduled physical education lessons. It connects the formal curriculum with classroom activity, break periods, active transport, extracurricular programs, school facilities, family involvement, and community partnerships. Through this coordinated structure, movement can become a normal and expected part of school life. Quality physical education must remain at the center of this approach. PE provides the structured teaching needed to develop

motor competence, confidence, health knowledge, motivation, and physical literacy. Other school-based activity opportunities can reinforce these outcomes, but they should not be used as substitutes for regular, well-planned, and inclusive PE lessons.

Responsibility for promoting physical activity should be shared across the school community. School leaders, PE teachers, classroom teachers, support staff, students, families, and community organizations all influence the conditions in which movement occurs. When responsibility is placed only on the PE department, initiatives may remain limited and difficult to sustain. Strong leadership is necessary to protect curriculum time, allocate resources, improve facilities, and coordinate different activity opportunities. School leaders can also ensure that physical activity is included in strategic planning, staff development, scheduling, and evaluation. Without leadership support, programs may depend too heavily on individual enthusiasm and disappear when personnel or priorities change.

Student voice is equally important. Students can identify barriers, suggest relevant activities, and explain which opportunities are enjoyable, accessible, or discouraging. Their participation in planning can improve ownership and help schools avoid designing programs based only on adult assumptions. Equity should guide all stages of implementation. Activity opportunities must be accessible to students with different abilities, cultural backgrounds, financial circumstances, confidence levels, and previous experiences. Schools should provide varied options, adapted activities, equipment support, safe facilities, and affordable or free participation wherever possible.

Planning should remain realistic and sustainable. Small, regular changes that become part of daily routines may produce greater long-term value than ambitious short-term projects. Clear responsibilities, manageable goals, staff cooperation, and gradual implementation can help schools maintain activity programs over time. Ongoing evaluation is also necessary. Schools should examine not only how many programs are offered but also who participates, which groups remain excluded, and whether activities produce meaningful changes in daily behavior. Student feedback, participation records, observation, and environmental review can support continuous improvement. Overall, coordinated strategies are more likely than isolated initiatives to create lasting change. A single activity day or short campaign may generate temporary interest, but a whole-of-school approach builds consistent structures that support movement throughout the year. When quality PE, shared responsibility, strong leadership, student voice, equity, realistic planning, and evaluation are combined, schools can develop a lasting culture in which physical activity is recognized as an essential part of learning, health, and daily life.

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