

# Physical Education is Essential for All Students: No Substitutions, Waivers or Exemptions for Physical Education

## Position

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators believes that each K-12 student should complete all required physical education courses and that state, school district, and school policies should not allow substitutions, waivers or exemptions for physical education courses, class time, or credit requirements.

### Terminology:

**Substitution** refers to the inappropriate practice of allowing student involvement in activities such as interscholastic sports, community sports, and other course (ROTC and marching band) to count for physical education class time or credit.

**Waivers** are the inappropriate practice of allowing school districts or schools to apply for permission to no longer provide students with state-mandated physical education class time or credit.

**Exemptions** are the inappropriate practice that allows students to be excused from physical education class time or credit, even when physical education credit is required for graduation.

## Rationale

The use of waivers, exemptions and substitutions to positively impact student learning of physical education content or to positively impact levels of physical activity is not supported by current research-based evidence. Further, the notion that the skills and knowledge of physical education can be waived, replaced or replicated by school or community physical activity programs or educational programs from other academic disciplines, is both outdated and shortsighted when considering students' current needs. School districts must comply with state requirements for physical education and not allow substitutions, waivers or exemptions to satisfy requirements and to meet the current and future health needs of students.

Physical education is an academic subject and, as such, demands the same rigor as other subjects. Physical education provides students with a sequential K-12 standards-based program designed to develop many movement skills, knowledge to create and implement personal plans for physical activity and fitness, and social-emotional learning leading to meaningful participation in daily physical activity.

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Substantial evidence shows that children and young people are less active now than ever, and instructional programs in physical education are essential for building their skills, advancing their knowledge, and contributing to their dispositions toward physical activity at all stages of their lives. School and district policies have the fundamental purpose of meeting students' needs and providing for their learning in a way that will support a successful adult life. In view of students' low levels of physical activity and their need to learn how to plan, implement, evaluate and adjust their own physical activity programs, high-quality physical education courses are needed to meet those outcomes.

Participating in physical activity alone does not provide students with the essential learning they need to establish the foundations for a physically active lifestyle. Schools have the exclusive responsibility to provide their students with these essentials and do so through high-quality instruction taught by certified physical education teachers.

The three inappropriate practices — substitutions, waivers and exemptions — are policies that eliminate the opportunity for each student to experience a full offering of high-quality standards-based physical education. In some cases, school districts and schools inappropriately allow exemptions from physical education class time or credit due to medical illness or disability. While student health and safety are paramount, physical education is required as stated in Section 300.108 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: “Physical education services, specially designed if necessary, must be made available to every child with a disability receiving FAPE [free appropriate public education], unless the public agency enrolls children without disabilities and does not provide physical education to children without disabilities in the same grades” (United States Department of Education, 2005).

Current federal policy, the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, includes physical education and health as part of a well-rounded education, which should be offered to all students. Further, physical education is an academic subject and an essential piece of whole-child education. It is supported by health experts and leaders in policy development, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the American Heart Association, the U.S. Surgeon General, and the National Association of State Boards of Education.

Below are examples that show that the use of waivers, substitutions and exemptions is not supported by research, does not provide students with the learning outcomes communicated in the current SHAPE America National Standards for K-12 Physical Education, does not meet current expectations of the federal *ESSA* for a well-rounded education, and is not supported by health experts and leaders in both education and health policy development.

- *Physical education is positively related to increased academic performance* (Shepard & Trudeau 2005; Castelli, Hillman, Buck, & Erwin, 2007; Reed, Masjow, Long, & Hughey, 2013; Castelli, Glowacki, Barcelona, Clavert, & Hwang, 2015). Eleven of 14 studies found one or more positive associations between school-based physical education and indicators of academic performance (CDC, 2010).
- *Activities or courses such as marching band do not meet recommended physical activity guidelines.* Marching band students carrying heavy instruments obtained moderate-

intensity physical activity for only 9.5 minutes daily and subjects carrying light instruments obtained moderate-intensity physical activity for only 8.3 minutes daily (Strand & Sommer, 2005).

- *Participation in team athletics does not appear to lead to lifelong involvement in physical activity.* According to Shifan, Carroll, Watson, Paul, Carlson, and Fulton (2015), the percentage of participation by adults in team sports generally included in high school athletic programs is low, ranging from less than one percent to just under three percent.
- *Every Student Succeeds Act (2015).* “The term ‘well-rounded education’ means courses, activities, and programming in subjects such as ... health, physical education...” (S. 1177-298 Sec. 4108). Structured physical education is also listed as a program that supports safe and healthy students (S. 1177-178. Sec. 4108).
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013). The CDC Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model states that physical education is the foundation of a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP). “A CSPAP reflects strong coordination and synergy across all of the components: quality physical education as the foundation, physical activity before, during, and after school, staff involvement, and family and community engagement.”
- American Heart Association (AHA, 2015). The AHA position paper titled, *Increasing and Improving Physical Education and Physical Activity in Schools: Benefits for Children’s Health and Educational Outcomes*, states that “Physical education in the nation’s schools is an important part of a student’s comprehensive, well-rounded education program and a means of positively affecting life-long health and well-being. The American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, and the American Diabetes Association will continue to support standards-based, robust, more frequent physical education and physical activity in schools. By addressing physical education across the country—the educational component, accountability, as well as the amount of activity and time spent—policymakers, decision makers, and teachers will maximize children’s potential for a lifetime of physical activity, health, and wellness” The position document also states that physical education should be mandatory and should not allow waivers, substitution or exemptions.
- National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE; Bogden, Brizious, & Walker, 2012). The NASBE model policy states, “While PE classes provide students with opportunities to be physically active and learn about the importance of lifelong physical activity, not all physical activity is physical education” (p. 27). “Because students learn essential knowledge and skills in physical education, enrollment in physical education class may not be waived on the basis of participation in athletic programs, ROTC, band, chorus, or similar activities that provide physical activity but are not physical education” (p. 28).
- Surgeon General (National Prevention Council, 2010). The National Prevention Strategy document lists daily physical education as a strategy that can “guide our Nation in the most effective and achievable means for improving health and well-being.” It also recommends that students “participate in fitness testing... and support individualized self-improvement plans.”

### Conclusion

Physical education is valued as a foundational component for the health and well-being of students by health experts and policy leaders and has been shown to have a positive association with academic performance. Content standards (clear statements of what students should know and be able to do at each grade level) for physical education are now in place at the national and state level that guide learning, just as in other content areas. Policies that allow substitutions, waivers or exemptions deny students the opportunity to learn these valued skills and knowledge and apply them as adolescents and adults.

Physical education develops physically literate students. The physically literate individual demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns; applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance; demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness; exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others; and recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction (SHAPE America, 2014).

Close scrutiny of policy and practice in states, school districts, and schools is critical so that all students are provided with an education experience that includes physical education (SHAPE America, 2015, p. 5). State, school district, and individual school policy should not allow substitutions, waivers or exemptions from physical education class time or course credit requirements.

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