

Physical Education and Physical Activity

Students often perform better academically when schools recognize the importance of and provide opportunities for **Physical Education and Physical Activity**.^{1,2} A comprehensive school physical activity program includes physical education, physical activity during school, physical activity before and after school, staff involvement, and family and community engagement.³ The physical education component ensures that students receive the knowledge and skills to lead physically active lifestyles now and tomorrow.

This analysis explores the extent to which a sample of local education agency (LEA) policies from the 2017-2018 school year, representative at the state level, addressed the physical education and physical activity topics. The LEAs studied are a sample of 432 agencies, spanning 19 states and the District of Columbia (hereafter “selected states”; see maps below and [Methods Appendix](#) for more details on the state selection), and include both public school districts (“districts”; n = 368) and charter LEAs (n = 64).⁴

Within the Physical Education and Physical Activity domain, we assessed seven topics (see [Coding Appendix](#)). In this brief, we present data separately for public school districts and charter LEAs.

Public School District Policies

The district sample included 368 LEAs in 20 selected states, weighted to be representative of districts at the state level. For these data, we determined the percentage of the topics addressed, on average, across the districts within each state and across all districts studied. To support easy comparisons in the comprehensiveness of district policy across states, percentages were given one of four designations: none (0%), low (< 42%), moderate (42% to < 75%), or comprehensive (\geq 75%).

Notably, this assessment does not speak to the prescriptiveness of LEA policies; policies that included firm mandates and policies that merely encouraged activity counted equally in this measure of comprehensiveness. (See [Methods Appendix](#) for more information on our coding process.)

For each of the 20 states, we also present a comparison between district data and state statutes and regulations for the same seven physical education and physical activity topics. The same categorizations of none, low, moderate, and comprehensive are used to present the state data. Note that the state data presented herein only represent a subset of the state law data compiled and presented in our companion [state law report](#) and the state law data included in the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) [State Policy Database on School Health](#).

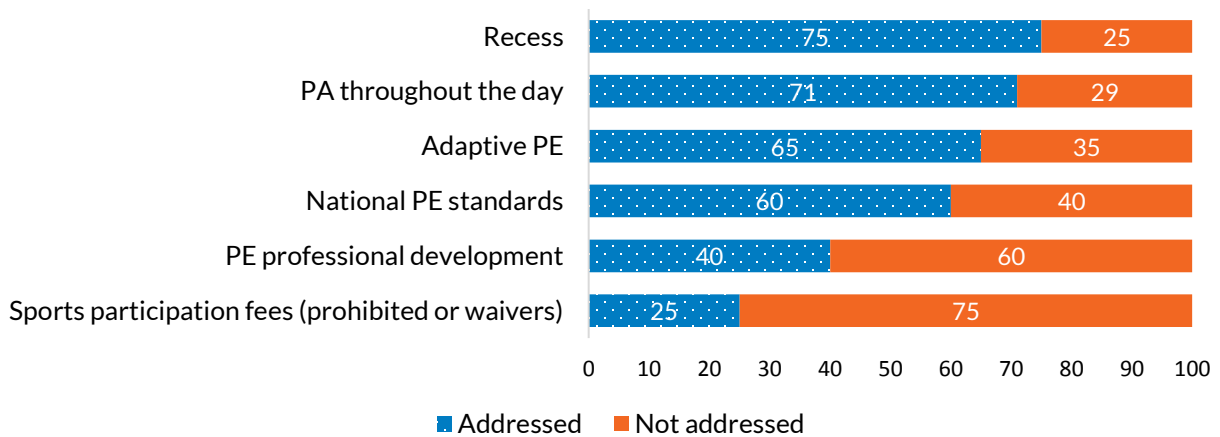
District policies varied considerably across states on their coverage of physical education and physical activity topics.

- **Public school district policies in California and the District of Columbia had comprehensive coverage of the physical education and physical activity topics examined (range: 86% to 96%; average: 91%).** In 12 other states, districts have moderate coverage of physical education and physical activity topics (range: 44% to 72%; average: 58%). Districts in six states (ID, IN, MI, MS, NJ, NM) had low coverage in their policies (range: 21% to 41%; average: 31%).
- **Sixty percent of districts in the selected states addressed all elements or otherwise refer to the National Physical Education Standards⁵ within district policy (see Figure 1).** Developed by SHAPE

America, these standards provide a baseline for all schools and districts to ensure that students are receiving adequate physical education.

- **Several of the districts analyzed did not address the provision of adapted physical education for students with disabilities (35%) within district policy.** Federal law mandates that physical education be provided to students with disabilities, with specially designed instruction if necessary.⁶
- **A handful of districts in the selected states allowed schools to provide exemptions for physical education within their policies.** Districts included exemptions for academics (11%) and disability (21%), and/or substitutions of other activities (33%). Except in cases of medical necessity, exemptions from physical education may not always be in the best interest of students.⁷
- **Forty percent of the districts analyzed explicitly addressed providing professional development for physical education teachers.** Professional development opportunities are critical to ensure that teachers are equipped with the most current knowledge about physical education.^{7,8}
- **Nearly three-quarters of districts in this sample addressed providing physical activity throughout the day (e.g., classroom breaks; 71%) or through recess (75%).** Eighteen percent of districts required physical activity throughout the day and 29 percent of districts required daily recess. In comparison to a previous nationwide evaluation of policies on physical activity throughout the day, the current sample of policies addressed these topics more often.⁹ Providing opportunities for physical activity throughout the day can not only help increase the amount of physical activity students engage in, but also help improve their on-task focus and behavior.¹⁰
- **Eleven percent of districts in the selected states allowed participation fees to be collected to play sports.** Another quarter (25%) of districts prohibited fees or allowed for collecting participation fees but specifically provided for waivers in certain situations. Schools that collect fees to participate in school sports may limit physical activity opportunities for some students.¹¹

Figure 1. Percent of public school districts covering selected physical education and physical activity topics in written policy.

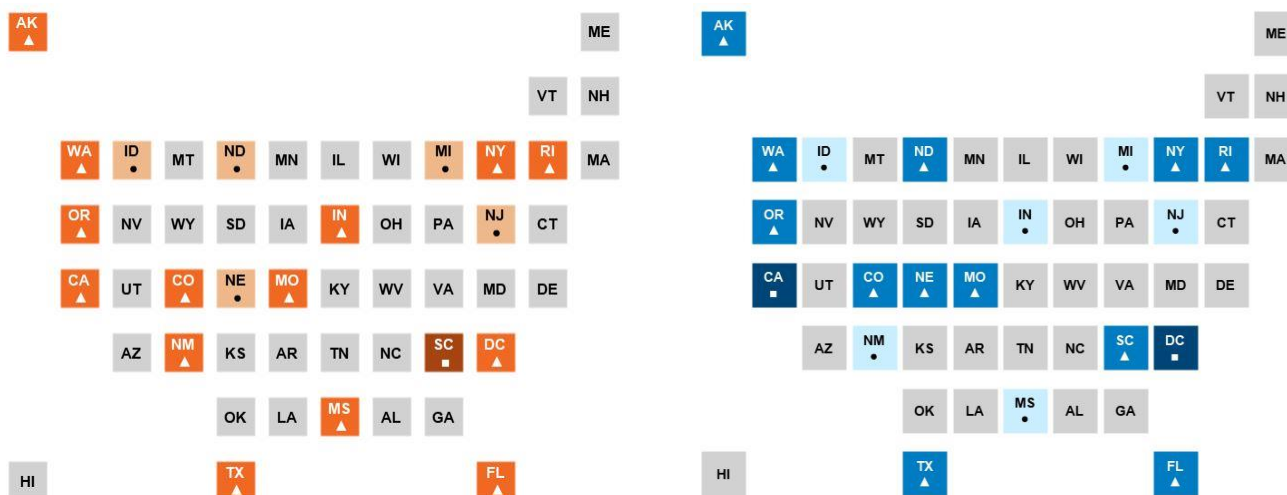


In more than half of the analyzed states, physical education and physical activity were addressed similarly at the state and district levels.

- **State laws and district policies, on average, had the same level of comprehensiveness in 12 of the studied states (See Figures 2a and 2b).** In four states, state law was more comprehensive than district policies.

- **District policies addressed some physical education and physical activity topics more often than state laws.** Specific topics more commonly addressed in district policies than state law related to physical activity opportunities throughout the school day (71% of districts vs. 50% of states), recess (75% of districts vs. 55% of states), physical education professional development for teachers (40% of districts vs. 30% of states), and sports participation fees (25% of districts vs. 20% of states).

Figure 2a and 2b. State law (left) and public school district (right) comprehensiveness of physical education and physical activity topics in policy



These maps show the proportion of states (left panel) and districts (right panel) in each of the 20 selected states that have [■] **comprehensive** (state panel: 1; district panel: 2), [▲] **moderate** (state panel: 14; district panel: 12), [●] **low** (state panel: 5; district panel: 6), or [-] **no** (state panel: 0; district panel: 0) coverage of physical education and physical activity topics in state and district policies, respectively. For this report, only the 20 states represented with colored squares were studied (at the state and district levels); states shown in gray were excluded from this analysis.

- **State laws and district policies within the 20 states were fairly consistent in their attention to physical education curricula and standards; this is likely because districts generally followed state law on these issues.** Sixty percent of states and districts, respectively, included language that incorporated or referred to national physical education standards. Likewise, 60 percent of states and 61 percent of districts addressed time spent in physical education.
- **The only topic addressed more often in state laws than district policies related to adaptive physical education.** While 85% percent of states addressed adaptive physical education, only 65 percent of districts did so.

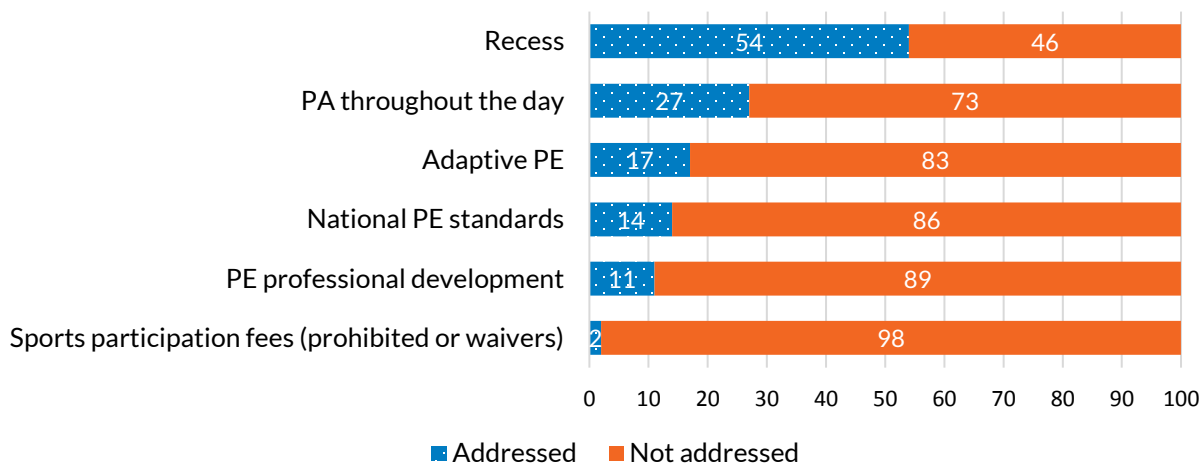
Charter LEA Policies

We also collected policies for a sample of 64 charter LEAs across the 20 selected states. Depending on the structure of charter LEAs in a given state, such policies may be applicable for a single school or for multiple schools run by the same charter provider. Charter policies often addressed different aspects of physical education and physical activity when compared to district policies. Because the number of charter policies collected in a single state was often small (proportionate to their representation across all LEAs in the state), we chose to look across the full sample of charter schools rather than make generalizations at the state level.

Across the 20 states, charter LEAs addressed only a limited number of physical education and physical activity topics.

- Charter LEAs most often addressed recess, with 54 percent of charter LEAs either encouraging or requiring some type of recess (see Figure 3). Just over a quarter of charter LEAs addressed physical activity throughout the day.
- A small percentage of charter LEAs examined for this analysis allowed exemptions from physical education classes for academics (2%) or disability (2%), or substitutions (9%). The remaining charter LEAs either prohibited exemptions or did not have a policy on this topic.

Figure 3. Percent of charter LEAs covering selected physical education and physical activity topics in written policy



The Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with Child Trends, examined the extent to which 11 healthy schools domains were addressed in local education policies across 20 strategically selected states (including 19 states and the District of Columbia; see Methods section for details on the sampling methodology). These domains include the 10 components of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model: Health Education; Physical Education and Physical Activity; Nutrition Environment and Services; Health Services; Counseling, Psychological, and Social Services; Social and Emotional Climate; Physical Environment; Employee Wellness; Family Engagement; and Community Involvement. An additional domain, WSCC References, addresses the extent to which district policies include explicit references to the WSCC model, or similar language such as the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions' Coordinated School Health model. Sub-briefs covering the other domains can be found at <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/the-current-landscape-of-school-district-and-charter-policies-that-support-healthy-schools>.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2010). The Association Between School-Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance, Retrieved from: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/pe_paper.pdf.

² Rasberry, C.N., Lee, S.M., Robin, L., et al. (2011). The association between school-based physical activity, including physical education, and academic performance: A systematic review of the literature. *Preventive Medicine*. 52 Suppl 1:S10-20.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Comprehensive School Physical Activity Programs: A Guide for Schools, (2013). Retrieved from: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/professional_development/e-learning/CSPAP/assets/FullCourseContent-CSPAP.pdf.

⁴ For purposes of this work, a charter LEA is an LEA listed in the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data (SY 2014-15) as an "Independent Charter District."

⁵ Shape America. (2014). National Standards & Grade-Level Outcomes for K-12 Physical Education. Reston, VA.

⁶ Physical Education. 34 C.F.R. 300.108.

⁷ Institute of Medicine. (2013.) Educating the Study Body: Taking Physical Activity and Physical Education to School. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

⁸ SHAPE America. The Essential Components of Physical Education. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://www.shapeamerica.org/upload/TheEssentialComponentsOfPhysicalEducation.pdf>.

⁹ Piekarz-Porter, E., Schermbeck, R.M., Leider, J., Young, S.K., Chriqui, J.F. (2017). Working on Wellness: How Aligned are District Wellness Policies with the Soon-To-Be Implemented Federal Wellness Policy Requirements? Chicago, IL: National Wellness Policy Study, Institute for Health Research and Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago, . Retrieved from: <https://go.uic.edu/NWPSProducts>.

¹⁰ Mahar, M.T., Murphy, S.K., Rowe, D.A., Golden, J., Shields, A.T., Raedeke, T.D. (2006). Effects of a classroom-based program on physical activity and on-task behavior. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, 38(12), 2086.

¹¹ Eyer, A., Piekarz-Porter, E., & Serrano, N. (2019). Pay to play? state laws related to high school sports participation fees. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, 25(3):E27-E35.