

# Building Lifelong Wellness Through Physical Education



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## Introduction

Today's children and adolescents are growing up in a world with fewer natural opportunities for movement and increasing demands on their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Schools are uniquely positioned to counter these trends, and physical education plays a critical role in doing so. When implemented with intention, PE supports far more than momentary activity during the school day—it helps students develop the skills, confidence, and motivation needed to lead healthy, active lives well beyond childhood. This course examines how high-quality physical education contributes to lifelong wellness by exploring three interconnected dimensions:

- **Why** physical education is essential to whole-child development and long-term health
- **How** physical literacy, skill development, and confidence shape students' movement experiences
- **What** educators can do to design inclusive and engaging PE programs that support every learner

Participants will learn how movement influences physical health, cognitive growth, emotional well-being, and academic success. They will also explore instructional practices that empower students to enjoy movement, build competence, and cultivate healthy habits that extend into adulthood. Ultimately, this course frames physical education not simply as a school requirement, but as a foundational component of lifelong wellness for every student.

# Section 1: The Role of Physical Education in Lifelong Wellness

Physical education has long been recognized as an essential part of the school curriculum, yet its role in shaping lifelong wellness has never been more important than it is today. Children and adolescents are growing up in an environment that often limits natural movement while encouraging extended periods of sitting and screen use. At the same time, schools face increasing expectations to support not only academic growth, but also students' physical health, emotional well-being, and social development. Physical education is uniquely positioned to address all of these needs. When implemented intentionally, it becomes a powerful foundation for lifelong wellness rather than a short-term opportunity for exercise.

This section explores how physical education supports whole-child wellness, why schools play a critical role in supporting lifelong health habits, and how movement connects directly to learning, behavior, and long-term well-being.

## 1.1 Physical Activity in Youth: Importance, Trends, and Shifts in Behavior

### *What is Physical Activity and Why is it Important?*

According to the World Health Organization, physical activity includes any movement of the body that is produced by skeletal muscles and requires energy expenditure (WHO, 2024). In everyday life, this extends far beyond organized exercise or sports. Physical activity occurs during transportation such as walking or cycling to school, while completing work or household tasks, during play and recreation, and through intentional exercise. Movement can take place at different intensity levels, from moderate activities like brisk walking to more vigorous

activities such as running or competitive sports. Importantly, physical activity is accessible to people of all ages and ability levels and can be adapted for enjoyment, skill development, and overall well-being (WHO).

Regular participation in physical activity plays a central role in supporting physical health, mental well-being, and long-term quality of life (WHO, 2024). Engaging in consistent movement helps reduce the risk of developing noncommunicable diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, and certain cancers. It also supports healthy bone and muscle development, improves cardiovascular fitness, enhances mood, and contributes to better sleep and stress management. In contrast, low levels of physical activity combined with prolonged sedentary behavior significantly increase the risk of poor health outcomes (WHO). As screen time continues to rise among children and adolescents, inactivity has become a growing public health concern.

### ***Inactive Behavior***

Over the past several decades, the daily lives of children and adolescents have shifted dramatically. Many students spend a significant portion of their day seated in classrooms, followed by additional hours using digital devices at home. Opportunities for unstructured outdoor play, walking to school, and neighborhood recreation have declined for many families. These lifestyle changes have contributed to lower overall physical activity levels and increased sedentary behavior among youth.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) recommend that children and adolescents engage in an average of at least 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity each day across the week (WHO, 2020; CDC, 2024). This daily movement should consist primarily of aerobic activities that raise the heart rate and support cardiovascular health, such as brisk walking, running, cycling, active play, and

organized sports. These regular activity levels are essential for supporting healthy growth, physical fitness, and long-term disease prevention during critical developmental years. In addition to daily aerobic movement, the WHO emphasizes the importance of incorporating vigorous-intensity activities and exercises that strengthen muscles and bones at least three days per week. Activities such as jumping, climbing, resistance exercises, and sports that involve sprinting or quick changes in direction help build strong bones, improve muscular strength, and enhance overall physical resilience (WHO).

Despite the clear benefits of physical activity and well-established global recommendations, most adolescents do not meet these guidelines. According to the WHO (2024), 81 percent of adolescents aged 11 to 17 worldwide were classified as physically inactive in 2024, meaning they did not achieve the recommended levels of daily physical activity. The data also reveal a significant gender gap. Approximately 85 percent of adolescent girls were inactive compared to 78 percent of adolescent boys (WHO). These trends highlight a growing public health concern and underscore the urgent need for schools, families, and communities to create more consistent, accessible, and engaging opportunities for movement. For educators, this data emphasizes the critical role that physical education and school-based activity programs play in reversing inactivity trends and supporting lifelong wellness.

### ***Trends***

Rates of childhood obesity in the United States have increased dramatically over the past several decades, signaling a serious and ongoing public health concern. In the 1960s, obesity affected only about 5 percent of children and adolescents. By 2020, that number had risen to approximately 20 percent, meaning that nearly 14.7 million U.S. children and teens met the criteria for obesity (Powell, 2025). When children and adolescents who are classified as overweight are also

included, the scope of the issue becomes even more alarming. An additional 16.1 percent of youth fall into the overweight category, indicating that more than one in three young people in the United States are now considered either overweight or obese (Powell).

Experts also note that childhood obesity rates increased sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic, and there has been little indication of a meaningful decline since that time (Powell, 2025). In fact, emerging research suggests the problem may be worsening among children with the most severe weight challenges. A 2025 study found that the number of youth in the two highest body mass index classifications increased by 2.5 times between 2008 and 2023, pointing to a growing concentration of severe obesity among young people (Powell). These upward trends raise concerns about the long-term health trajectories of today's children and the escalating demands that obesity-related conditions will place on healthcare systems.

The physical health consequences of childhood obesity are extensive and well documented. Children with obesity face increased risks for high blood pressure, prediabetes, type 2 diabetes, polycystic ovary syndrome, chronic liver disease, kidney disease, cardiovascular problems, and joint and movement difficulties (Powell, 2025). These medical conditions not only affect daily functioning and quality of life but also increase the likelihood that obesity and related disorders will persist into adulthood. Beyond physical health, childhood obesity is also strongly linked to social stigma, which can negatively influence children's participation in physical activity, peer relationships, and school engagement (Powell). The impact of childhood obesity extends beyond physical illness to include significant psychological and economic consequences. Research shows that children with obesity are at greater risk for mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, and these psychological effects can persist into adulthood (Goel et al., 2024). Additionally, the long-term

economic burden associated with childhood obesity is substantial due to increased healthcare costs and reduced productivity across the lifespan (Goel et al.).

Schools are uniquely positioned to address these concerns because they reach nearly all children regardless of background, family resources, or access to extracurricular activities. Physical education often provides the only structured physical activity opportunity that some students receive on a regular basis (CDC, 2024). This makes the quality and intent of physical education programming especially important for supporting students who may not have access to organized sports, safe outdoor spaces, or family-based physical activity outside of school (CDC).

## **1.2 Physical Education as a Foundation for Lifelong Health**

Physical education in schools extends far beyond addressing short-term concerns such as inactivity, obesity, or low fitness levels. Instead, it serves as a long-term investment in students' overall health by establishing the habits, attitudes, and skills that support lifelong wellness (Hiveclass, 2025). When implemented with intention, PE becomes a critical foundation for healthy living rather than a temporary opportunity for exercise. Physical education is uniquely positioned to shape lifelong health behaviors because it reaches students during their most formative years. Students who participate in consistent, high-quality PE programs are significantly more likely to remain active into adulthood (Hiveclass). This is especially important when considering that a large proportion of adults in the United States do not meet recommended physical activity levels, with more than one quarter classified as completely inactive (Hiveclass).

Early exposure to structured, positive movement experiences helps reduce the likelihood that students will adopt sedentary lifestyles later in life (Hiveclass,

2025). PE also plays a key role in teaching students that movement is not limited to sports performance or competition. Instead, it promotes physical activity as a personal health resource that can be adapted across the lifespan. By learning how to move safely, build fitness, and enjoy physical activity during childhood, students are more likely to carry these habits into adolescence and adulthood (Hiveclass).

### ***Lifelong Benefits Rooted in Physical Education***

Physical education influences multiple dimensions of wellness that extend far beyond the gymnasium (Hiveclass, 2025):

- **Physical wellness:** Regular participation in physical activity reduces the risk of chronic conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and obesity while supporting healthy growth and cardiovascular fitness.
- **Mental and emotional health:** Exercise supports mood regulation, reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression, promotes better sleep, and enhances stress management.
- **Social development:** Team activities and cooperative games foster communication, teamwork, empathy, and respect for others.
- **Self-discipline and perseverance:** Goal setting, practice, and skill development in PE teach students persistence, self-motivation, and resilience in the face of challenge.

Research consistently shows that early physical activity patterns strongly influence adult behavior. Students who receive comprehensive and consistent PE instruction are more likely to view physical activity as a normal and essential part of daily life rather than an optional task (Hiveclass). These early experiences shape how students perceive their own abilities, confidence, and relationship with movement, all of which affect long-term participation in physical activity.

## ***Shaping Health-Conscious Adults Through Physical Education***

Schools play a central role in creating health-conscious individuals by normalizing daily movement and promoting positive health behaviors from an early age. Consistent exposure to physical education helps students develop routines of activity, understand the value of movement for both physical and mental health, and build confidence in their ability to be active (Hiveclass, 2025). These patterns often extend well beyond graduation, contributing to healthier adults and stronger communities. Physical education should not be viewed solely as a means of keeping students active in the moment. Instead, it should be recognized as a powerful tool for shaping lifelong health behaviors, reducing future disease risk, and cultivating generations of individuals who value movement as an essential part of a healthy, balanced life (Hiveclass).

### **1.3 The Connection Between Movement, Brain Function, and Learning**

The relationship between physical activity and learning is well established. Movement does not only benefit the body. School-based physical activity programs can improve students' attention and some measures of academic performance (CDC, 2024). Students who are physically active tend to have better grades, improved school attendance, stronger brain function, and more positive classroom behaviors compared to their less active peers (CDC). In addition, quality physical education programs aligned with SHAPE standards promote positive personal and social behaviors by teaching students how to communicate effectively, cooperate with others, and resolve conflict; through activities such as taking turns and agreeing on game rules, students develop essential social skills that support both learning and relationships (Fitzgerald, 2023).

## ***Movement Breaks in the Classroom***

Movement breaks, often referred to as brain breaks, are short opportunities for students to engage in movement or take a break from seated learning during the school day (Beck, 2023). These breaks typically last three to four minutes and may occur as a pause from academic work or as part of a classroom transition. During a movement break, students are able to shift gears by relaxing, breathing, and refocusing after sustained periods of attention and concentration (Beck). Short movement breaks that involve whole-body, rapid, cardiovascular activity increase breathing rate and the amount of oxygen in a child's bloodstream, which can improve concentration and the ability to focus on learning tasks (Beck). Brain and body breaks are most effective when they stimulate the entire body, supporting both physical movement and mental re-engagement before students return to academic instruction. Physical activity in the classroom provides several documented benefits for students. It can improve concentration and students' ability to stay on task, reduce disruptive behaviors such as fidgeting, and increase students' motivation and engagement in learning (CDC, 2024b). It is also associated with improved academic performance, including higher grades and test scores, and contributes to increasing students' total daily physical activity (CDC).

National guidance emphasizes that classroom physical activity should be intentionally planned and supported within a comprehensive school physical activity program; however, movement breaks can also happen sporadically throughout the school day. Key recommendations include (National Network of Public Health Institutes & Health Resources in Action, n.d.):

- Do not replace physical education or recess with classroom physical activity
- Integrate physical activity into academic lessons to reinforce learning
- Provide activity breaks outside of instruction

- Use classroom movement to reinforce skills taught in physical education
- Minimize barriers such as lack of space or equipment
- Do not withhold movement as a form of discipline
- Provide teachers with ongoing professional development related to classroom physical activity

Together, these practices position classroom movement as a valuable supplement to physical education that supports both student health and learning without replacing essential school-based activity opportunities.

## **Section 1 Conclusion**

This section has highlighted the critical role physical education plays in supporting lifelong wellness by addressing students' physical health, mental well-being, social development, and academic success. Current trends in youth physical activity, rising sedentary behavior, and increasing rates of childhood obesity underscore the urgent need for intentional, high-quality physical education in schools. The evidence presented shows that physical activity supports not only long-term health outcomes but also students' ability to learn, regulate behavior, and engage meaningfully in school. Because schools reach nearly all children, physical education serves as a vital access point for establishing lifelong movement habits, particularly for students who may have limited opportunities for physical activity outside of school. While Section 1 has focused on why physical education is essential for lifelong wellness, the next section will explore how students develop the skills, confidence, and motivation needed to be active for life. Section 2 introduces the concept of physical literacy, examining how fundamental movement skills, motivation, and positive movement experiences lay the foundation for lifelong participation in physical activity.

## Section 1 Key Terms

Academic Performance - The measurable outcomes of student learning such as grades, test scores, attention, and engagement, which research shows can improve with regular physical activity.

Aerobic Activity - Physical activity that increases heart rate and breathing for an extended period, such as brisk walking, running, or cycling, and supports cardiovascular health.

Bone-Strengthening Activity - Movement that creates force on the bones through impact or tension, such as jumping, hopping, or resistance exercises, helping build strong bones during growth years.

Brain Breaks - Short, structured movement breaks during academic instruction that allow students to reset attention, reduce restlessness, and improve focus.

Cardiovascular Fitness - The ability of the heart, lungs, and circulatory system to supply oxygen efficiently during sustained physical activity.

Classroom Physical Activity - Planned or unplanned movement opportunities during academic instruction that supplement but do not replace physical education or recess.

Fundamental Movement Skills - Basic movement patterns, including locomotor skills like running and jumping, stability skills like balancing, and manipulative skills like throwing and catching.

Health-Related Fitness - Components of fitness linked to health outcomes, including cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition.

Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity (MVPA) - Movement that noticeably increases heart rate and breathing, such as brisk walking, running, or active play, and is recommended daily for children and adolescents.

Motor Skills - Learned abilities that allow the body to move effectively, including balance, coordination, strength, and control of large and small muscle groups.

Movement Breaks - Short, intentional periods of physical activity during the school day that give students opportunities to move, re-energize, and refocus.

Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) - Chronic health conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers that are not transmitted person-to-person and are influenced by lifestyle factors including physical inactivity.

Obesity - A medical condition involving excess body fat that increases the risk of serious health problems, defined in children using BMI percentiles based on age and sex.

Overweight - A weight classification for children indicating body weight above the recommended range for age and sex but below the threshold for obesity.

Physical Activity - Any movement of the body that results in energy expenditure, including activities performed during play, recreation, transportation, household tasks, and structured exercise.

Physical Education (PE) - A planned, sequential, standards-based instructional program in schools that teaches students the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for lifelong physical activity and wellness.

Physical Inactivity - Failure to meet recommended physical activity guidelines, typically defined for youth as achieving less than 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day.

Physical Literacy - A combination of movement skills, confidence, motivation, and understanding that enables individuals to participate in a wide variety of physical activities throughout life.

Sedentary Behavior - Activities that involve little physical movement and low energy expenditure, such as sitting for long periods while using screens or engaging in passive recreation.

Skeletal Muscles - Muscles connected to the skeleton that contract to produce voluntary movement, forming the basis of all physical activity.

Social Development - The process through which students learn communication, teamwork, cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution, all of which can be strengthened through physical education.

Vigorous-Intensity Activity - Physical activity that significantly increases heart rate and breathing, such as running, fast cycling, or competitive sports.

Wellness - A multidimensional concept that includes physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being, supported by healthy behaviors and lifestyle choices.

## **Section 1 Reflection Questions**

1. How confident are you that your classes provide equitable access to physical activity for students with disabilities, chronic health conditions, or low confidence? What could be strengthened?
2. What is your strategy for balancing skill instruction, fitness development, and enjoyment in each unit or lesson?
3. Reflect on your own experiences with physical education growing up. How have those experiences influenced your current views about PE?

4. How do your current class activities support not only physical skill development but also emotional regulation, confidence, and social skills?
5. After reading this section, what is one meaningful change you feel compelled to make in your own teaching practice or advocacy for student wellness?

## Section 1 Activities

1. **Movement Progress Portfolio:** Begin a simple portfolio system where students track personal progress, reflections, or fitness goals over time.
2. **Activity Modification Practice:** Take one existing unit and revise it so that it is more inclusive for students with mobility, sensory, or confidence-related needs.
3. **Student Engagement Observation:** Observe two of your own class sessions and record which activities generate the highest engagement. Reflect on why those activities work well.
4. **Physical Activity Homework Challenge:** Design an age-appropriate optional activity challenge students can complete at home with families, promoting movement beyond school.
5. **Movement Enjoyment Survey:** Create a brief survey that asks students which PE activities they enjoy most and why. Use responses to diversify your curriculum.

## Section 2: Physical Literacy, Skill Development, and Confidence

Physical education is most effective when it supports the whole child by developing not only physical skills, but also confidence, motivation, and a lifelong connection to movement. This section explores the concept of physical literacy as the foundation for meaningful participation in physical activity and examines how skill development and confidence are cultivated through intentional instruction. Students do not become physically literate simply by practicing isolated skills. They grow through positive experiences that help them understand movement, believe in their abilities, and feel motivated to stay active. By focusing on physical literacy, confidence-building strategies, and joyful engagement in movement, educators can create learning environments that empower students to view physical activity as both achievable and valuable throughout their lives.

### 2.1 Understanding Physical Literacy

The concept of physical literacy is gaining increasing global recognition across education, sport, health, and recreation due to its powerful role in supporting lifelong engagement in physical activity. Rather than focusing only on fitness or skill performance, physical literacy emphasizes the development of the whole person through movement (Durdin-Myers, 2024). Its growing prominence is tied to its capacity to promote active lifestyles, build confidence and competence across a wide range of activities, deepen understanding of movement, and cultivate a holistic appreciation of health and well-being (Durdin-Myers). As concerns about youth inactivity and long-term health outcomes continue to rise, physical literacy offers a meaningful framework for reshaping how physical education supports students across the lifespan.

## ***Defining Physical Literacy***

While multiple definitions of physical literacy exist, they consistently reflect a shared core understanding. The International Physical Literacy Association defines physical literacy as “motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life” (Durden-Myers, 2024). Despite slight variations in wording across countries and organizations, there is broad agreement that physical literacy goes beyond simply learning sports skills. Instead, it embodies the ability to move with confidence and competence in a variety of physical activities and environments throughout life. This shared consensus highlights an important shift in physical education. The focus is no longer solely on athletic performance or fitness testing, but on helping students develop the personal capacities that enable them to participate in physical activity in meaningful, enjoyable, and sustainable ways (Durden-Myers).

## ***Key Components of Physical Literacy***

Physical literacy is made up of several interconnected components that collectively shape how individuals engage with movement (Durden-Myers, 2024):

- **Physical competence:** This includes fundamental movement skills, coordination, agility, balance, and overall fitness. These physical capabilities form the foundation for participation in diverse physical activities.
- **Knowledge and understanding:** Students develop awareness of how physical activity supports health and well-being, along with an understanding of movement principles and safe participation.
- **Motivation and confidence:** Enjoyment, self-belief, and intrinsic motivation play a critical role in sustaining long-term participation in physical activity.

- **Social connection:** Many physical literacy frameworks acknowledge the role of social interaction, personal value, and connection in shaping positive movement experiences.

Together, these components influence how students move physically, think cognitively, feel emotionally, and connect socially through physical activity. Physical literacy is therefore not limited to what students can do with their bodies, but also how they perceive, value, and engage in movement across different settings and stages of life (Durden-Myers).

### ***Foundations of Physical Literacy***

Physical literacy is grounded in several complementary philosophical and scientific traditions. Its holistic and personalized nature is informed by philosophical perspectives that emphasize embodiment and lived experience. Psychology contributes understanding of the importance of confidence and motivation, while neuroscience provides evidence for the relationship between cognitive development and motor skill acquisition (Durden-Myers, 2024). From a social justice perspective, physical literacy is increasingly viewed as both a human capability and a human right, reinforcing the need for inclusive, meaningful, and equitable movement opportunities for all students (Durden-Myers). These foundational perspectives collectively support the idea that physical literacy must be developed through positive, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate experiences that respect each learner's individual context and potential.

### ***Recognizing Every Student's Physical Literacy Journey***

Physical literacy is relevant to every individual, regardless of ability, background, or previous movement experience. It is a personalized and lifelong process that evolves across the lifespan through participation in a wide range of movement experiences, including sport, recreation, play, lifestyle activities, and active

transportation (Durden-Myers, 2024). Each student's physical literacy journey is shaped by interactions with people, environments, cultures, and opportunities, making it essential for schools to offer varied and accessible movement experiences (Durden-Myers).

## 2.2 Developing and Promoting Physical Literacy in the Physical Education Curriculum

Physical education teachers play a central role in nurturing physical literacy by intentionally designing learning environments that address physical, cognitive, affective, and social development (Durden-Myers, 2024). Developing physical literacy in students involves providing age-appropriate activities, emphasizing enjoyment, setting challenging yet achievable goals, empowering students through choice, prioritizing the learning process over performance outcomes, and offering consistent encouragement (Durden-Myers). Physical literacy also serves as a tool for challenging societal pressures and gender stereotypes associated with sport, helping students build confidence to explore a wide range of physical activities without fear of judgment (Durden-Myers). The following are key strategies for promoting physical literacy in PE (Durden-Myers):

- **Promoting motivation through meaningful challenge:** Motivation is strengthened when students experience autonomy, appropriate challenge, and a sense of connection with others. Providing choice in activities, designing tasks that are developmentally challenging, and fostering positive peer relationships helps support intrinsic motivation. Exploring students' interests, including recreational and lifestyle activities, and integrating them into the curriculum when possible further enhances engagement. Positive teacher-student relationships and cooperative peer interactions also promote empathy and encouragement in PE.

- **Building confidence through positive movement experiences:** Confidence is best supported by focusing on personal growth rather than pass-fail assessments. Recognizing effort over performance and providing constructive, motivational feedback encourages students to persist through challenges. As students develop understanding, capability, and independence, they build self-efficacy and a greater sense of personal responsibility for their physical activity participation.
- **Developing physical competence through inclusive instruction:** Physical competence is enhanced when teachers understand students' individual needs and progress. Instruction should be inclusive and supported by adaptive strategies. Skills should be developed progressively, beginning with simple movements and gradually increasing in complexity. Lessons should incorporate both skill-related and health-related fitness components across a variety of activities and environments, allowing all students to experience success at their own pace.
- **Strengthening knowledge through explicit instruction:** Teachers should make learning explicit by explaining activities, highlighting progress, and providing movement-related vocabulary. Students benefit from understanding the qualities of effective movement and the principles that support holistic health and well-being.
- **Deepening understanding through reflection:** Regular reflection allows students to consider their engagement, recognize their progress, and identify how they can maximize their potential. Reflection also helps students learn to move purposefully, creatively, and with intention, and strengthens their understanding of the long-term benefits of physical activity.

Ultimately, physical education teachers play a significant role in nurturing students' physical literacy. Ongoing reflection, review, and revision of instructional practice helps ensure that learning experiences remain positive, meaningful, and supportive for all students (Durdan-Myers, 2024b). Through intentional teaching, educators can help students build the skills, confidence, and understanding needed to sustain active, healthy lifestyles throughout their lives.

## **2.2 Building Student Confidence through PE**

Physical education provides a unique setting for building student confidence, particularly for students who may not naturally feel outgoing or self-assured in traditional classroom environments. PE allows these students to develop motor skills while also strengthening leadership abilities and overall well-being through active participation (Barack, 2025). Because movement-based learning is social and experiential, it creates opportunities for students to discover personal strengths, take healthy risks, and grow in self-confidence. This approach is reflected in the National Physical Education Standards developed by SHAPE America, which emphasize the role of physical education in developing leadership and personal responsibility across grades pre-K through 12 (Barack, 2025). These will be discussed further in section 3. Jesse Weber, education content and programs manager for SHAPE America, explains that effective teaching in PE mirrors strong instructional practices used in academic classrooms. Just as a math teacher intentionally engages a wide range of students to ensure broad participation, PE teachers should also rotate opportunities for leadership, participation, and visibility so that all students feel included and valued (Barack).

One strategy for building confidence and leadership is intentional reflection. Weber recommends providing time at the end of class for students to discuss the activities they participated in, what they learned about themselves, and what they

can focus on improving in the future (Barack, 2025). These conversations help students process their experiences, recognize personal growth, and move forward together toward shared goals rather than focusing only on individual performance (Barack).

Confidence is also strongly influenced by the structure of activities used in PE. Weber notes that some traditional games that eliminate students from play, such as dodgeball, have been removed from many modern PE curricula because elimination can lead to negative emotional experiences and disengagement (Barack). When students are forced to sit out after being eliminated, they lose opportunities for movement and may feel discouraged from future participation. The goal of physical education should always be consistent engagement rather than sidelining students (Barack, 2025).

Another key strategy for supporting confidence is thoughtful grouping. Educators can intentionally pair students who may feel less confident with supportive peers who help create a safer and more encouraging learning environment (Barack, 2025). When students feel emotionally safe and supported by their peers, they are more likely to take part in activities, attempt new skills, and persist through challenges (Barack).

## **2.3 Cultivating a Love of Physical Activity**

For many students, physical education has long been associated with rigid routines, limited choice, and an overemphasis on traditional fitness activities that may not feel engaging or relevant. When physical activity is framed as something students *have to do* rather than something they *get to do*, it often loses its sense of joy and purpose. This negative association can follow students well beyond the gym, shaping how they perceive exercise and whether they choose to remain active later in life. As Lukasavitz (2025) emphasizes, when students do not enjoy

the process or understand the purpose behind movement, disengagement is likely, and the lasting value of physical education is diminished. Play absolutely can be exercise. Exercise does not need to be rooted in discomfort or negative emotions to be effective. In fact, when movement is joyful, purposeful, and personally meaningful, students are more likely to engage fully and develop lifelong habits (Lukasavitz).

### ***Reflecting on and Letting Go of Outdated Practices***

The first step in cultivating a positive relationship with physical activity is honest reflection. Many long-standing practices in physical education were adopted simply because “that is how it has always been done.” Activities such as running laps without a clear instructional purpose, using exercise as discipline, or emphasizing performance over participation can unintentionally foster negative attitudes toward fitness (Lukasavitz, 2025). Reflection allows educators to evaluate whether these practices truly support student learning and long-term wellness. Key reflective questions can guide this process (Lukasavitz):

- Are students enjoying this activity?
- Are they moving because they feel motivated or because they are required?
- Do they understand why the activity matters for their health?
- Do they have personal fitness goals and a plan to work toward them?

Equally important is student voice. Gathering feedback through quick anonymous surveys can provide insights that may not be visible from the front of the gym (Lukasavitz, 2025). Questions such as what students enjoy most, what could improve class, and whether they believe physical education is important help educators align instruction with student needs and interests. Reflection and

feedback become catalysts for building a more student-centered and meaningful physical education program.

### ***Helping Students “Feel” Fitness Through Play***

Students begin to value physical activity when they can connect what they feel in their bodies to what they are learning. Lukasavitz (2025) highlights the importance of helping students understand how their bodies respond during movement in simple, developmentally appropriate ways. Short “pause and pulse” moments during lessons allow students to take ownership of their fitness by learning that the heart is a muscle that becomes stronger with movement (Lukasavitz). By practicing how to take their pulse using a six-second count and multiplying by ten, students begin to understand heart rate in a concrete way. Learning about target heart rate zones and how they relate to cardiovascular endurance helps students see fitness as measurable and meaningful rather than abstract. These brief check-ins transform movement from a passive experience into an active learning process. Students are no longer just completing an activity. They are understanding the purpose behind it. This awareness supports motivation, self-efficacy, and a deeper connection to their own health (Lukasavitz).

## **Section 2 Conclusion**

Physical literacy, skill development, and confidence are deeply interconnected and together shape how students engage with physical activity during their school years and beyond. When students develop competence through inclusive instruction, build confidence through supportive learning environments, and experience movement as meaningful and enjoyable, they are more likely to remain active throughout their lives. This section has highlighted the importance of nurturing physical literacy as a lifelong journey, supporting confidence through intentional teaching practices, and cultivating a genuine love of physical activity

through purposeful, joyful movement. These elements form the foundation of an effective physical education program and prepare students for long-term success in both health and well-being. Building on this foundation, the next section will focus on designing engaging and inclusive physical education programs that translate these principles into sustainable practice for all learners.

## **Section 2 Key Terms**

Agility - The ability to move quickly and efficiently while maintaining control of the body, often through changes in direction or speed.

Body Awareness - An understanding of how one's body moves through space, including the ability to sense position, movement, and coordination during physical activity.

Challenge Point - The level of difficulty in an activity that is demanding enough to promote growth without overwhelming the learner.

Competence - A learner's ability to perform skills effectively and with control, contributing to a positive sense of capability in physical activity.

Cooperative Learning - An instructional approach in which students work together to accomplish shared movement goals, promoting peer support and collaboration.

Feedback (Instructional) - Information provided to students to guide improvement, reinforce progress, and strengthen understanding during skill development.

Holistic Development - An approach to teaching that supports students' physical, emotional, cognitive, and social growth through integrated movement experiences.

Inclusion - The intentional design of activities so that students of all abilities, backgrounds, and confidence levels can participate meaningfully in physical education.

Intrinsic Motivation - A desire to participate in physical activity due to personal interest, enjoyment, or satisfaction rather than external rewards.

Learning Climate - The emotional and social environment created by the teacher that influences students' willingness to take risks, participate, and persist in movement tasks.

Motor Coordination - The ability to use multiple body parts smoothly and efficiently during movement, often involving timing, sequencing, and rhythm.

Movement Competence - A student's capacity to perform a range of physical actions with control, efficiency, and confidence across various movement contexts.

Peer Support - Encouragement and positive interaction among classmates that helps students feel safe, motivated, and connected during physical activity.

Reflection Practice - A structured process in which students think about their learning experiences, identify progress, and set goals for improvement in movement.

Self-Efficacy - A student's belief in their ability to successfully participate in physical activity, which strongly influences motivation and effort.

Self-Perception - How students view their own abilities, strengths, and challenges in physical activity settings, influencing confidence and engagement.

Skill Progression - The intentional sequencing of physical skills from simple to more complex so learners can build competence gradually and successfully.

## Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. Which components of physical literacy (competence, motivation, confidence, knowledge, social connection) do you feel most confident teaching, and which ones could you strengthen?
2. What outdated practices or routines in PE might unintentionally weaken students' motivation or connection to movement, and how could they be redesigned?
3. How do you ensure that students understand why they are engaging in certain activities, and how might improving this understanding foster stronger motivation?
4. Think about grouping strategies in your class. How do your choices impact students who are less confident or less physically skilled?

## Section 2 Activities

1. **Skill Progression Audit:** Examine one unit in your curriculum and map how skills progress from simple to more complex. Identify any gaps or steps that may need more scaffolding.
2. **Motivation Patterns Analysis:** Track student participation across different activities to identify which formats (games, skills practice, fitness stations, cooperative tasks) generate the highest motivation.
3. **Elimination Game Redesign:** Choose a traditional elimination game and revise it so students remain active and included throughout. Test the new version and note student reactions.

4. **Curriculum Variety Review:** Examine how much variety exists in your current curriculum compared with the diverse activities that support physical literacy. Identify areas to expand.
5. **Feedback Language Inventory:** Record or script examples of your feedback during a lesson. Evaluate how often it emphasizes effort, growth, and personal improvement rather than performance alone.

## Section 3: Designing Inclusive PE Programs for Lifelong Wellness

Physical education plays a critical role in shaping how students view movement, health, and physical activity across their lifespan. For programs to be truly effective, they must be intentionally designed to be inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate for all learners. This section focuses on how educators can build physical education programs that support lifelong wellness by grounding instruction in national standards, creating inclusive learning environments, and using evidence-based strategies to meet the diverse needs of students. By aligning instruction with SHAPE America's National Physical Education Standards, incorporating Universal Design for Learning principles, empowering students through voice and choice, modifying activities and competition, and leveraging technology for accessibility, educators can ensure that physical education is equitable, meaningful, and impactful for every student.

### 3.1 Start with the Standards

SHAPE America's National Physical Education Standards define what students should know and be able to do as a result of participating in a highly effective physical education program (SHAPE, 2025). These standards serve as a national

framework to support the holistic development of students and promote consistency and quality across physical education programs throughout the United States. States and local school districts use the standards to guide the development and revision of standards, frameworks, and curricula to ensure aligned, inclusive and developmentally appropriate instruction. The standards are organized across four grade spans: PreK–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12. Each standard includes grade-span learning indicators that outline expected learning at each developmental stage. These indicators are not intended to show alignment across grade levels, though some may naturally align depending on content and skills taught (SHAPE, 2025). The standards and resources related to them can be found on SHAPE America’s website.

### ***Overview of the National Physical Education Standards***

- **Standard 1: Develops a Variety of Motor Skills:** Students develop motor skills across a variety of environments through learning experiences in physical education. Motor skills are a foundational part of child development and support the movements of everyday life. The development of motor skills contributes directly to each student’s physical literacy journey (SHAPE, 2025)
- **Standard 2: Applies Knowledge Related to Movement and Fitness**  
**Concepts:** Students apply knowledge of movement concepts, tactics, and strategies across a variety of environments. They also apply knowledge of health-related and skill-related fitness to enhance overall well-being. The use of movement knowledge supports students in becoming more versatile and efficient movers and contributes to physical literacy development.
- **Standard 3: Develops Social Skills Through Movement:** Students develop social skills necessary to demonstrate empathy and respect for others and to foster and maintain relationships. Physical education learning

experiences also support the development of communication, leadership, cultural awareness, and conflict resolution skills in a range of movement settings.

- **Standard 4: Develops Personal Skills and Chooses to Engage in Physical Activity:** Students develop an understanding of how movement is personally beneficial and learn to choose physical activities that are personally meaningful. These may include activities that provide social interaction, cultural connection, exploration, choice, self-expression, appropriate challenge, and health benefits. Students also develop personal skills such as goal setting, identifying strengths, and reflection to enhance their physical literacy journey.

Together, these standards establish a comprehensive framework that supports students' physical, cognitive, social, and personal development from early childhood through adolescence. They also reinforce the role of physical education as a foundation for physical literacy and lifelong engagement in physical activity (SHAPE, 2025).

### 3.2 Creating Inclusive Physical Education Environments

An inclusive physical education environment is one in which every student feels capable, supported, and motivated to participate. True inclusion requires more than simply allowing students to be present in the space. It requires intentional instructional design that removes barriers to participation while preserving the integrity of learning goals. Ortlinghaus (2025) emphasizes that small instructional adjustments can have a powerful impact on student confidence, engagement, and long-term skill development.

## ***Leveraging Universal Design for Learning in Physical Education***

The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) extend naturally into the gymnasium. Hall (2020) explains that inclusive learning environments are built by offering multiple means of engagement, representation, and action. In physical education, this means presenting instructions both verbally and visually, modeling skills in multiple ways, and being prepared to provide hands-on guidance when appropriate. Educators should offer varied ways for students to engage with exercises and demonstrate learning, while maintaining consistent learning targets (Hall). For example, students might work toward the same cardiovascular endurance goal through different activities such as walking, cycling, dancing, or modified running. As long as the underlying objective is preserved, fitness can look different for each student while achieving the same developmental outcome (Hall).

## ***Empowering Students Through Voice and Choice***

One of the most effective ways to make fitness both more inclusive and engaging is by giving students a voice in how they move. When students have meaningful choices, motivation increases and ownership develops (Lukasavitz, 2025). Voice and choice recognize that students are individuals with different interests, strengths, and comfort levels with physical activity. This autonomy is critical because students will eventually be responsible for making their own health and fitness decisions outside of school.

Practical strategies for incorporating voice and choice include offering multiple levels of challenge within activities, allowing students to help design warm-ups or fitness games, and providing short periods of structured self-selected activity time. During this time, students choose from safe and inclusive options such as dance, tag games, stretching, or partner challenges (Lukasavitz). This is not unstructured free time. It is purposeful play with clear expectations for staying

active, making safe choices, and including others. Some educators enhance this approach by setting up play stations with movement suggestions or offering long-term goals such as tracking laps toward completing a personal 5K. Students who enjoy walking or running can monitor their progress, while others engage in activities like basketball or volleyball that may not appear as often in formal units. This balance allows students to work toward the same fitness goals through different pathways (Lukasavitz). The guiding principle becomes clear: different paths, same destination. Every student works toward improved fitness in a way that resonates with them personally.

### ***Modifying Fitness Activities and Differentiating Competition for Student Success***

Inclusive physical education requires that both fitness activities and competitive structures be adaptable so that every student has a meaningful opportunity to succeed. Ortlinghaus (2025) emphasizes that modification is not about lowering expectations, but about adjusting how students access and demonstrate the same learning objectives. When activities or competition are rigid, students with differing strength levels, confidence, or physical abilities may disengage. Thoughtful adaptations allow all students to participate with dignity while still working toward shared fitness goals.

For physically demanding skills such as rope climbing, peg climbing, or pull-ups, simple adjustments can make a significant difference. Instead of requiring all students to perform the full skill immediately, educators may allow students to hang for a set amount of time to build grip strength and upper body endurance or use assistance bands for supported pull-ups. These options preserve the core fitness outcome while offering multiple entry points based on student readiness (Ortlinghaus, 2025). As students build strength and confidence, supports can be gradually reduced.

Equally important is differentiating competition levels during gameplay and fitness challenges. When competitive activities are included in lessons, allowing students to self-select into varying levels of intensity helps reduce anxiety and increases participation (Ortlinghaus, 2025). Some students thrive in highly competitive environments, while others feel more successful in lower-pressure settings focused on cooperation and skill development. By offering options that range from noncompetitive to more competitive play, educators create space for students to engage at a level that aligns with their comfort, confidence, and skill (Ortlinghaus).

### ***Using Technology to Support Accessibility***

Technology offers powerful tools for promoting inclusivity in physical education. Many adaptive fitness platforms provide video demonstrations, modified exercise ideas, and visual workout schedules that support independent engagement (Hall, 2020). Visual schedules can be especially helpful for students who benefit from predictable routines and clear expectations. Collaboration with special education professionals is essential when incorporating technology for accessibility. These colleagues can help identify which tools students already use successfully and how those tools might be integrated into physical education instruction (Hall).

### **Section 3 Conclusion**

Designing inclusive, engaging, and sustainable physical education programs requires thoughtful planning, flexibility, and a commitment to meeting students where they are. By grounding instruction in SHAPE America's national standards, educators establish a strong foundation for physical literacy and lifelong engagement in movement. The use of Universal Design for Learning principles ensures that instruction is accessible to all learners through multiple pathways for participation and demonstration of learning. Strategies such as empowering

students through voice and choice and adapting activities and competition levels to support success, further promote confidence, motivation, and sustained engagement. Together, these approaches reinforce the idea that physical education is not just about short-term performance, but about equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and positive attitudes they need to pursue healthy, active lives beyond the school setting. When educators intentionally design programs that value inclusion, purpose, and student agency, physical education becomes a powerful tool for supporting lifelong wellness for all learners.

### **Section 3 Key Terms**

Accessibility Tools - Digital or physical supports such as visual schedules, adaptive platforms, or modified equipment that help students with diverse needs participate meaningfully in physical education.

Adaptive Instruction - Teaching methods that adjust tasks, equipment, rules, or expectations to ensure all students can engage successfully in the same learning objective.

Developmental Appropriateness - The alignment of activities, expectations, and skill demands with students' physical, cognitive, and social stages of development.

Differentiated Competition - The practice of offering varying levels of challenge or competitiveness within the same activity so students can participate at a level that matches their comfort and ability.

Equitable Participation - Intentional efforts to ensure that every student has fair and meaningful access to movement experiences regardless of ability, background, or confidence.

Evidence-Based Practice - Instructional decisions informed by research, professional guidelines, and verified teaching strategies that support student learning and wellness.

Learning Indicators - Developmentally aligned statements within standards that describe what students should know or be able to do at different grade spans.

Learning Targets - Clear, student-friendly statements that outline the specific knowledge or skills students are expected to demonstrate during a PE lesson or unit.

Modification - A purposeful change to an activity, rule, or piece of equipment that maintains the learning goal while allowing students to participate successfully.

Multiple Means of Action - A universal design principle that encourages offering different ways for students to respond, participate, or demonstrate learning in physical education.

Multiple Means of Engagement - A universal design principle focused on offering varied ways for students to stay motivated and connected to learning.

Multiple Means of Representation - A universal design principle that promotes presenting information in different ways, such as visual models, verbal explanations, or demonstrations.

Personal Relevance - The degree to which movement experiences or fitness choices feel meaningful, relatable, or valuable to an individual student.

Play Stations - Structured activity zones that offer a variety of movement choices, allowing students to select different tasks while still meeting learning goals.

Progress Monitoring - The ongoing process of collecting information about student growth to guide instructional decisions and adjustments.

Skill-Related Fitness - Components of fitness such as agility, balance, coordination, power, reaction time, and speed that support success in various physical activities.

Standards-Based Instruction - Teaching that is purposefully aligned to national, state, or district standards to ensure consistency, quality, and measurable learning outcomes.

Structured Choice - A design strategy that provides students with a set of teacher-approved activity options that support autonomy while keeping learning goals consistent.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) - A framework that promotes flexible, inclusive teaching practices by providing multiple pathways for engagement, representation, and action.

Visual Modeling - The use of demonstrations, diagrams, or videos to show students how a skill or movement should be performed, supporting clarity and accessibility.

### **Section 3 Reflection Questions**

1. How well do your current lessons align with SHAPE America's National Physical Education Standards, and which standards do you find most challenging to implement?
2. How do you currently incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in your instruction, and which UDL area (engagement, representation, action) needs more attention?
3. Consider a time when modifying an activity significantly improved participation. What did you learn from that experience about student needs?

4. What strategies do you use to ensure students who are less confident or less physically skilled feel successful and valued in class?
5. After reflecting on this section, what is one meaningful change you feel inspired to make in your PE program to increase inclusion, engagement, or long-term impact?

## Section 3 Activities

1. **Standards Alignment Check:** Select one upcoming unit and map each lesson to SHAPE America's National Physical Education Standards. Identify areas where alignment could be strengthened.
2. **Inclusive Lesson Redesign:** Choose a recent lesson and rewrite it using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. Add multiple options for engagement, representation, and action.
3. **Voice and Choice Activity Plan:** Create a brief warm-up routine that includes at least three structured choices for students to select from based on interest and comfort.
4. **Technology Trial:** Implement one technology-based accessibility tool (videos, demo apps, timers, visual task lists). Reflect on which students benefited and how.
5. **Learning Target Rewrite:** Rewrite your current unit learning targets to be student-friendly, clear, and measurable. Share them visually in class.

## Course Conclusion

Building lifelong wellness through physical education requires more than teaching sports skills or delivering isolated fitness lessons. It demands intentional, inclusive,

and student-centered approaches that help learners understand the value of movement, develop the confidence to participate, and carry healthy habits into adulthood. Throughout this course, we explored the essential role of physical education in supporting whole-child well-being, from addressing rising inactivity and obesity trends to nurturing the cognitive, social, and emotional benefits of movement.

We also examined the importance of physical literacy, skill development, and confidence as critical foundations for long-term participation in physical activity. When students experience movement as meaningful, joyful, and accessible, they are far more likely to stay active throughout their lives. High-quality instruction, reflective teaching practices, and opportunities for autonomy all contribute to positive movement experiences that shape students' attitudes and behaviors well beyond their school years. Finally, we considered how educators can design physical education programs that are inclusive, engaging, and sustainable. Programs grounded in standards, built on Universal Design for Learning, enriched through student voice and choice, and adaptable to diverse needs ensure that every student feels capable and supported. These intentional design choices transform PE into a powerful driver of lifelong wellness.

## **Classroom Example**

Mr. Alvarez teaches physical education at a large middle school in an urban district. His students arrive with a wide range of experiences, abilities, interests, and comfort levels with physical activity. Some participate in community sports or recreational programs, while others have limited access to safe outdoor spaces, structured activities, or movement opportunities outside of school. As a passionate advocate for whole-child wellness, Mr. Alvarez believes physical

education should empower every student, not just athletes, to build confidence, develop skills, and discover forms of movement they genuinely enjoy.

Over the past few years, however, he has noticed concerning trends. Many students arrive to class feeling self-conscious, unsure of their abilities, or disconnected from traditional PE activities. Others view physical activity as something they “have to do,” rather than something meaningful for their long-term health. Some students avoid participation due to fear of being judged, while others struggle with stamina or coordination and quickly become discouraged. Determined to shift the culture of his PE classroom, Mr. Alvarez begins redesigning his program to promote physical literacy, inclusive movement experiences, and lifelong wellness habits.

## Challenges

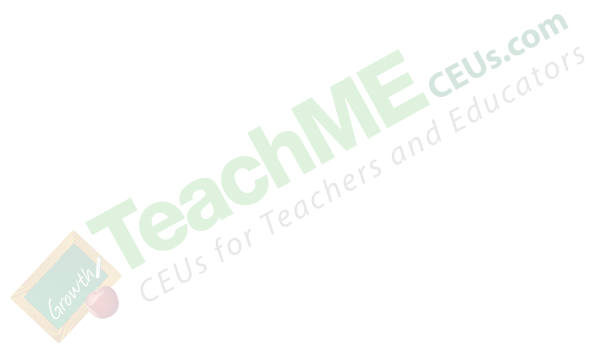
1. **Supporting a Wide Range of Abilities and Comfort Levels:** Mr. Alvarez’s students vary widely in physical competence, mobility, and confidence. Some excel in team sports, while others find traditional activities overwhelming or inaccessible. He wants to ensure that every student can participate successfully, without frustration, embarrassment, or fear of failure.
2. **Reducing Negative Associations with Fitness:** Several students associate “fitness days” with discomfort, punishment, or embarrassment. Mr. Alvarez wants to help students build positive connections with movement.
3. **Promoting Student Voice and Choice:** While he wants students to take ownership of their wellness journey, Mr. Alvarez wonders how to balance autonomy with structure.

4. **Creating an Inclusive Environment Where All Students Feel Safe and Seen:** Students who are new to PE, managing disabilities, or navigating body-image concerns often hesitate to participate fully. Mr. Alvarez wants to build a classroom culture that normalizes varied abilities, reinforces encouragement over competition, and ensures that every student feels valued.
5. **Ensuring Long-Term Relevance and Transferability:** Mr. Alvarez hopes students leave his class not just knowing how to play sports, but understanding how movement supports mental health, stress management, social connection, and lifelong wellness.

## Considerations for Support and Improvement

- How can Mr. Alvarez modify activities so that all students - regardless of skill, disability status, or fitness level - feel successful and included during PE?
- What strategies can he use to introduce physical literacy concepts such as confidence, competence, and motivation in developmentally appropriate ways?
- How might he redesign lessons to emphasize personal growth, self-paced challenges, and meaningful movement experiences rather than performance or comparison?
- In what ways can student voice and choice be built into warm-ups, movement stations, or wellness goals to increase motivation and ownership?

- How might he incorporate technology—such as heart rate monitors, activity trackers, or digital reflection tools—to help students better understand their bodies and progress while ensuring accessibility for all learners?



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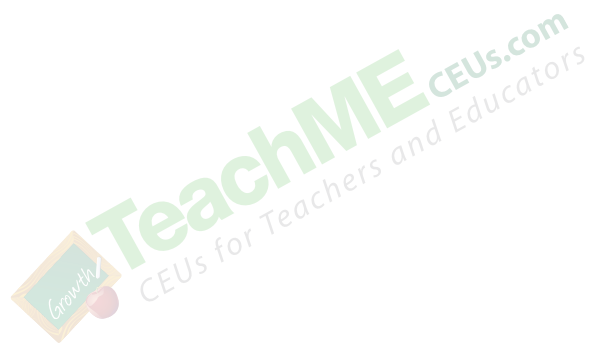
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