



Physical and Health Education Canada

# **ACTIVATING SCHOOLS AS A KEY DRIVER IN FEDERAL SPORT POLICY**

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## Background and Rationale

The Future of Sport Commission presents a critical opportunity to reimagine and strengthen Canada's sport system. While much of the national dialogue has focused on high-performance sport, governance, and funding structures, the foundational role of school sport in shaping the sport development, participation and excellence in Canada must not be overlooked.

Schools have a strong influence on the lives of young people. For many children and youth—including those from marginalized, rural, or underserved communities—**school is the first, and often only, place they experience organized sport.** It is within schools that young people develop skills, understanding, confidence, competence, and values through stages of participation in sports and physical activity. Physical education and school sports offer far more than competition; they serve as a training ground for athletic development, character building, teamwork, leadership, and the formation of lifelong physical literacy and activity habits regardless of geography, ability, socioeconomic status, or identity.

By submitting a response, we advocate for the inclusion of school sports as a central pillar in the future of sport in Canada—ensuring that safety, equity, inclusion, and developmentally appropriate practice are foundational, not optional. **Investing in school sports is not only a matter of accessibility and inclusion—it is a smart, systemic investment in the future of Canadian sport and society.**

In April 2025, Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada brought together educators from each province and territory, youth, student teachers, deans of education, academics, Indigenous knowledge holders, and representatives from education-adjacent organizations, including health, recreation, and sport to explore and define their collective vision for the Future of Sport in Canada. In short, they highlighted that to truly enhance sport participation and development in Canada, **schools must be more than a consideration—they must be a cornerstone in federal sport policy.** This submission reflects the insights, priorities, barriers, and shared commitments that emerged from that national dialogue.



## About PHE Canada

PHE Canada is Canada's charitable association that champions healthy, active kids by promoting and advancing quality physical and health education opportunities and healthy learning environments from coast to coast to coast. PHE Canada's vision is that each and every young person in Canada lives a healthy, physically active life.

As evident in its [Strategic Plan 2025-29](#), PHE Canada is deeply committed to advancing safe, inclusive, and equitable physical education, physical activity, and sport experiences by addressing gaps and inadequacies within Canada's current educational, recreational, and sport structures. PHE Canada recognizes that meaningful change in these systems requires both building knowledge and capacity, as well as putting that knowledge into consistent practice—ensuring that values like safety, inclusion, equity, rights, and well-being are not just taught, but actively demonstrated and upheld.

PHE Canada is driven by a robust Board of Directors, and councils of physical and health educators, youth representatives, equity, diversity, and inclusion experts, and a Research Council from all post-secondary faculties of education, kinesiology and health across Canada. PHE Canada also convenes and collaborates with school system leaders and education organizations across the country.

## We believe that:

- Together, we can create safer, more supportive environments where every child, youth, and young adult has the opportunity to thrive—supported in ways that embrace their diverse identities, experiences, and abilities.
- It is our responsibility to honour diversity and reconciliation; to surface innovation; to develop accessible, high-impact resources for K-12 classrooms as well as post-secondary teacher educators; and to advocate for practices that are equitable, inclusive, and grounded in evidence.
- The way forward requires a whole school, whole community, whole government—whole society approach.

PHE Canada has staff across the country and over 60 active projects and programs to ensure quality physical education and health education programming in classrooms. Our resources, programs, and projects span the physical activity, physical literacy, sport, physical education, and health and well-being domains. Our programs are free and in both English and French. Current programs, such as the [PHE Campus](#), [Move Think Learn](#), [At My Best](#), [Passport for Life](#), [Reboot](#), [Intramurals](#), [Game Changers](#), and others, are being implemented in thousands of schools and recreational and sport settings, impacting and supporting the development of millions of children and youth every year.

PHE Canada is proud to be one of the 29 multi-sport service organizations funded by Sport Canada. Despite having one of the largest and most direct impacts on children and youth across the country, PHE Canada remains among the most under-recognized and under-referenced organization in the national sport landscape.

**By further investing in schools, we not only nurture athletic talent but also champion sport participation and foster well-rounded, physically active individuals who contribute meaningfully to our communities and society at large.**

**Federal leadership in education is not unprecedented—it is constitutionally grounded and ethically necessary. Beyond these specific jurisdictions, the federal government has a broader national interest in youth development, public health, reconciliation, and social cohesion. Physical activity and school sport are proven to enhance mental health, academic performance, community engagement, and physical literacy—outcomes that benefit Canadian society as a whole.**

### TERMINOLOGY

In this submission, the following six key areas represent the school-based components that support long-term athletic development:

- **Physical education (PE)** refers to structured movement-based learning that fosters physical literacy and skill development, motor competence, and an appreciation for lifelong physical activity. Quality physical education is fundamental to developing movement confidence, age-appropriate physical competencies, and positive attitudes toward lifelong physical activity (Cairney et al., 2019).
- **Physical activity (PA)**, as stated by the Ministry of Health and defined by the World Health Organization, is any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure; this includes movements like crawling, walking, running, or lifting. For optimal benefits, children and youth should achieve at least 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity involving a variety of aerobic activities. Vigorous physical activities, and muscle and bone strengthening activities should each be incorporated at least 3 days per week.
- **Health Education (HE)** includes knowledge and skills related to overall well-being, such as mental health, social and community health, nutrition, personal safety, and healthy relationships.
- **Movement Based Pedagogy** consists of fun and active lessons that are comprised of two supporting parts: an academic challenge in any subject area and a physical challenge to enhance learning across subjects.
- **Physical Literacy** development features meaningful student experiences, empowers students, and integrates seamlessly with curriculum and sport development.
- **School Sport** refers to organized physical activity and athletic programming that is offered within or in connection with the K–12 education system. It includes intramural activities, interscholastic competitions, and school-based sport clubs or academies. School sport is typically facilitated by teachers, coaches, or community partners and takes place before, during, or after the school day. School sport is distinct from physical education in that it is voluntary, competitive, or skill-based, providing students with opportunities to apply physical literacy skills, build teamwork and leadership abilities, and experience personal growth. When intentionally designed, school sport contributes to broader educational outcomes such as inclusion, equity, and student engagement. As school sport is the terminology used throughout this document, this is the holistic definition we are applying and thus the focus of our Future of Sport submission.





## HISTORY OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORTING SCHOOLS

In 2015, the Government of Canada demonstrated a renewed commitment by adopting the revised [International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity, and Sport](#). This Charter reinforces universal principles such as gender equality, non-discrimination, and social inclusion—principles that schools are well positioned to champion through sport and physical activity. More recently, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action 10 urges the federal government to recognize and address the educational and wellness gaps faced by Indigenous children, including access to culturally relevant physical activity and sport opportunities. This places a clear responsibility on the federal government to support school sports and physical activity programs that not only promote health and inclusion but also incorporate Indigenous perspectives, ensuring equitable access and culturally safe spaces for all youth across Canada.

In May 2018, Canada’s Ministers responsible for sport, physical activity, and recreation—supported by Canada’s provincial and territorial health ministers—endorsed the country’s first-ever Pan-Canadian policy framework on physical activity and sedentary living. Known as the [Common Vision](#), this framework provides a practical, evidence-based roadmap for how governments and sectors must work together to increase physical activity levels and reduce sedentary behaviour, which is an independent risk factor for poor health. The role of schools and the education sector—working in partnership with community stakeholders—is clearly highlighted within this vision.

Sport Canada, through their innovation funding (2017-2023), provided funds to PHE Canada and many other education-adjacent organizations to pilot new approaches to increasing equity in sporting spaces. This initiative seed funded the [Spirit](#), [ReBoot](#), and [Game Changers](#) programs at PHE Canada. These programs live on from the initial investment, now reaching thousands of students annually.



In 2023, as part of the [Community Sport for All Initiative](#), Sport Canada provided two million dollars to PHE Canada’s Access to Action microgranting program. Access to Action focused on engaging students of equity-deserving populations in inclusive and meaningful sports and physical activity opportunities at school by removing barriers to participation and providing the resources necessary. Antony Rota, MP in the Nipissing-Timiskaming area, spoke about this funding, “Everyone in Nipissing-Timiskaming should have access to quality sport and physical activity opportunities. Together, we are building stronger and healthier communities right across the country. This initiative has helped hundreds of schools across Canada and thousands of students connect with community groups to increase the physical activity of equity-deserving young people.”

## Canada’s Constitution

### Section 93

**While Section 93 of the Constitution Act, 1867 confirms that education is primarily a provincial and territorial responsibility, it does not preclude federal involvement, especially where national interests, equity, or marginalized populations are concerned.**

**In fact, Subsection 93(4) clearly empowers the Parliament of Canada to “make remedial laws” in relation to education—a provision that reinforces the federal government’s role in ensuring that educational opportunities are fair, inclusive, and accessible, especially when disparities exist between jurisdictions.**

## THE ROLE OF INTERMEDIARIES

While federal leadership in education is essential, this work cannot fall solely to one sector or level of government. Instead, it requires a whole-of-government approach, working in concert with organizations and grassroots associations. **With aligned leadership and targeted collaboration, we can ensure that the future of sport is not a luxury—but a shared investment into equity, participation, and youth development.**

This is where organizations like PHE Canada come in. Organizations like PHE Canada, with deep expertise in education, physical activity, and sport are uniquely positioned to make change happen for the better for all. With national reach into educational systems and classrooms, PHE Canada can serve as a knowledge mobilization, implementation and impact partner—ensuring research to practice, accountability, enabling policies, and ensuring connections between curriculum, physical activity, and physical literacy and consistency in program safety and quality.

PHE Canada has been a foundational part of the school sport and physical education landscape for nearly 100 years—building educator capacity through evidence-informed training and advocating for affirming, child- and youth-centered learning. A direct partnership with the federal government would accelerate progress toward safe sport and significantly amplify the reach and impact of school-based sport programming.

Crucially, this is not just about developing elite athletes. It is about nurturing a safe and inclusive sport system that starts where it matters most: universal participation before, during, and after the school day—in every school, for every student.

**“Crucially, this is not just about developing elite athletes.”**



## CANADIAN SPORT POLICY ALIGNMENT

For many, school is the first—and sometimes only—place where they access sport and physical activity in a safe, supportive, and developmentally appropriate environment. Schools are not only places of introduction and learning but are also critical hubs for fostering physical literacy, social-emotional development, and lifelong habits of movement. Across the country, many schools also offer specialized programming and academic support for high-performing athletes, demonstrating the unique role schools play in nurturing both emerging talent and equitable access to sport.

According to [Jumpstart's 2024 State of Play Survey](#), a significant share of youth engagement in sport happens through school-based programs. The study revealed that **“the majority of youth (69%) reported having played sports at school on a team - 64% association/club, 45% rec centre, 33% after school program”**—underscoring the essential role that schools play in providing accessible, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate sport opportunities for young people. Moreover, this low participation rate outside of school disproportionately affects marginalized students, exacerbating existing inequalities and limiting their access to the numerous benefits associated with physical activity.



Although not explicitly recognized in the Canadian Sport Policy, physical education, physical activity, and school sports align directly with the Canadian Sport Policy 2012's goals, including:

### Introduction to Sport

Schools play a pivotal and foundational role within the national sport ecosystem. [20%](#) of Canada's population is school age. As a component of their formal education, physical education universally offers students the opportunity to gain the fundamental skills, knowledge, and attitudes to participate in organized and unorganized sport.

In the elementary school years, the focus is on physical literacy. Through physical education, students are introduced to specific sports and educated on the values of fair play, respect, and collaboration—key principles that align with the goals of school sport organizations.

Later in secondary school (ages 13–18) is a crucial window for sport development—often referred to as the 'Training to Train' stage. Moreover, the physical education curriculum often complements the broader sport system by promoting the importance of sport ethics, physical fitness, and wellness. This holistic approach ensures that students are not just developing physical skills but also expanding their knowledge about how physical activity contributes to overall health, teamwork, and community engagement.

### Recreational Sport

Intrascholastic sports programs serve as an important entry point for physical activity, especially for students who may not participate in competitive activities outside school. Activities are typically inclusive (no cuts, no fees) and emphasize fun, physical activity, and social interaction, with minimal competition. They are usually organized by physical education teachers or recreation staff and can include lunchtime tournaments, before- and after-school clubs, or themed activity weeks.

These programs also offer student leadership opportunities through athletic councils, coaching, and officiating, often translating to community sport and employment within the sector.



## Competitive Sport

Interscholastic sports involve teams from different schools competing in organized leagues and tournaments. Since it takes approximately 10,000 hours of focused practice and training for an athlete to reach their full potential, much of this critical development must take place while the athlete is still in school.

The sports offered vary by school, depending on factors such as staff availability, student interest, and specialized facilities. Common interscholastic sports include volleyball, basketball, soccer, hockey, track and field, and badminton. Interscholastic sports programs are usually governed by regional, provincial, or territorial volunteer associations that exist outside of the educational system. Despite this, physical education teachers are often the key organizers and coaches of interscholastic sports, utilizing their pedagogical expertise to create inclusive, developmentally appropriate activities.

## Sport for Development

School sports exist for more than just competition; they also promote positive, holistic youth development so that every child can thrive in life, not just on the ice, field or court. School sport, when intentionally designed, is a powerful equalizer and catalyst for individual and social change. School sport also plays a vital role in fostering physical, mental, emotional, and social growth. It builds resilience, leadership, teamwork, and confidence. It can support mental health, improve academic focus, and cultivate a sense of belonging and identity—especially when designed with inclusion and equity in mind. To offer such experiences and realize the potential of no cuts to all students is, at present, cost prohibitive.

For many of these young people, school sport is the only structured opportunity to engage in physical activity and experience the transformative benefits of sport. Indeed, more than half (51%) of children and youth miss out on organized sports and physical activities beyond school environments. This number climbs even higher among marginalized populations.

Moreover, physical education spaces offer an unparalleled opportunity to ensure young people are knowledgeable about how to prevent injury and harm, their rights, and the supports accessible to them.

Educators as teacher-coaches play a pivotal role in shaping student experiences in school sports—not only as instructors, but as mentors who guide young people through the values of discipline, teamwork, resilience, and personal growth that sports can uniquely offer. In the context of competition, educators help students navigate both success and failure in ways that promote emotional maturity, confidence, and social development.

Importantly, school-based sport also offers a powerful counter-narrative to traditional gender dynamics in both education and sport. While education typically remains a women-dominated profession and the broader sports world continues to be dominated by men—with men often coaching both boys' and girls' teams—school-based sports and physical education stand out for achieving gender parity. This creates a rare and critical opportunity: more girls are coached by women, and more students, regardless of gender, are exposed to diverse leadership models.

The benefits of this are far-reaching. Young women, in particular, gain access to role models who reflect their experiences, helping to increase participation, retention, and self-efficacy in sport. For all students, the presence of all genders in coaching roles fosters a more inclusive, respectful, and equitable sport culture.

**“Physical education and school sports challenge stereotypes, broaden perspectives, and help cultivate the next generation of confident, capable, and compassionate leaders—on and off the field.”**



## TAPPING INTO SCHOOL POTENTIAL

Each day, for twelve consecutive years, approximately **5.8 million** children and youth attend school. Schools are uniquely positioned to deliver high-quality, safe, and inclusive sport experiences that foster participation, belonging, and lifelong well-being, and in some cases, future Olympians. While schools face challenges—such as limited facility space, restricted access to equipment, time constraints, and the demands placed on teacher-coaches—these are not roadblocks; they are opportunities for innovation and collaboration.

By embracing a cultural shift that prioritizes safe physical activities, broadens participation beyond elite competition, and acknowledges teacher-coaches as leaders and collaborators in this space, Canada can re-imagine school sport and physical activity as a vibrant, accessible, and equitable system that meets the needs of all students.

In PHE Canada's gathering of educational leaders and school sport representatives from across the country, we explored a unified vision for the future of sport in Canada. Through this collaborative conversation, four key opportunities for federal leadership emerged —opportunities that, if acted upon, could strengthen the foundation of school sport and ensure it is accessible, equitable, and empowering for all students. These opportunities reflect both the aspirations of those working in education and the practical supports needed to realize a national shift in how school sport is designed, delivered, and valued. They include:

- **Targeted funding through Intermediaries,**
- **Centralized governance and school sport policies,**
- **A coordinated federal strategy,**
- **Enhanced teacher preparation and recognition.**

Each of these opportunities represents a critical lever for change—and together, they form a blueprint for a healthier, more inclusive Future of Sport in Canada.

“...the task is to recognize the transformative potential of a re-imagined school sport model and to take meaningful steps to value, invest in, and prioritize its role within the broader educational experience.”

Additionally, three concrete actions came forward.

1. **Coordinated Federal Strategy**
2. **Investment**
3. **Modernized Physical Activity and Sport Act**

Schools are not just a setting—they are a strategy, and their inclusion in the sport system is essential for creating lasting impact.



## Targeted Funding

**“School physical education and sports programs are severely underfunded, leaving essential needs like equipment, transportation, and volunteer support unmet. To truly foster healthy, active, and engaged students, we must invest in the resources that empower these programs to thrive.” Discussion participant**

Canada’s decentralized approach to schooling has led to deep disparities in the quality and availability of physical activity spaces across the country. Because building, maintaining, and upgrading school facilities falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, smaller and rural jurisdictions with limited tax revenue often struggle to invest in basic infrastructure such as gymnasiums, fields, and recreation spaces. At the same time, rapidly growing communities—especially those with increasing numbers of New Canadian and Indigenous youth—face infrastructure demands that outpace current capacity.

In northern and remote regions, including Nunavut, parts of the Northwest Territories, and northern parts of the provinces, many schools operate with aging or inadequate infrastructure. Some rely on portable classrooms and lack even the most fundamental physical activity spaces. While a few communities have benefited from recent investments, many students across the North and in First Nations schools under federal jurisdiction still lack safe and inclusive environments to be active and learn through sport.

Where physical activity spaces do exist, there is an urgent need for facilities that are inclusive and accessible—featuring safe changing rooms, accessible equipment, and barrier-free spaces that support all students, including those with diverse abilities.

Beyond physical infrastructure, schools are frequently under-resourced in terms of the basic equipment and operational support required to run consistent, safe, and inclusive sport programs.

Many participants in the PHE Canada Future of Sport discussion stated that they have an annual athletics budget of \$500–\$1,000, depending on the jurisdiction. One participant in the discussion notes that schools in their province do not designate funds to physical education. Instead, any funding they have depends on grants that the teacher has to apply for on their own time.

An annual athletics budget of \$500, a common benchmark in education, presents significant challenges for many school sports programs. While it may seem like a modest starting point, this budget is insufficient for several critical areas, including equipment, transportation, and other operational costs, resulting in limited opportunities for students and a reduction in the overall quality of school sports programs.

**“The cost of uniforms, balls, nets, cones, and other specialized equipment can add up quickly. For example, a basic set of equipment for a single sport—such as basketball or soccer—can cost hundreds of dollars, with many sports requiring multiple sets to accommodate the size of the school’s teams or to rotate out old, worn equipment. With only \$500 to allocate across all sports offered, it is nearly impossible for schools to maintain, update, or replace equipment consistently, leading to the use of outdated or unsafe gear. This not only impacts student safety, but also limits the ability to foster engagement in high-quality physical activity experiences.” Discussion participant**

Transportation is another major expense that quickly drains an athletics budget. For schools in rural, remote, or suburban areas, the cost of travel to and from sporting events—whether for away games or tournaments—can be substantial. This may involve organizing buses, costing thousands of dollars for even a small trip. With only \$500 allocated to the athletics program, schools are often forced to limit participation in local, regional or provincial competitions, severely reducing the opportunities for students to compete at higher levels.

The modest athletics budget also raises important equity concerns. With such limited resources, we heard that funds are usually directed toward mainstream interscholastic sports. As a result, schools are not able to respond to diverse student interests or needs. Many schools lack recreational, accessible or culturally relevant sport options, limiting who participates and how.

With the help of federal funding, one discussion participant noted that they were able to host the first sanctioned interscholastic sports competition for students with disabilities. Another noted that they created their own interscholastic cricket league with the equipment that they bought through the Access to Action grants. On a regular basis, PHE Canada receives emails from parents and students asking for our support to advocate for more inclusive school sports.

While the interscholastic fees to participate vary significantly, each school must withdraw funds from their budgets to participate. Participants in the discussion expressed frustration with this model. One discussion participant noted that **“there are a lot of different pots and hands in our PE budgets, leaving almost nothing to invest in our own students.”**

**“Funding goes to the top level athletes, which is a lower percentage of students, rather than funding for all students in the school...”**  
Discussion participant.

Others highlighted that school sport associations often lack stable, predictable funding streams themselves, which makes it difficult to plan long-term, deliver equitable programming, or invest in safety, inclusion, and quality improvement initiatives.

In some regions, provincial governments provide modest grants or indirect support, but these are not always tied to clear expectations or accountability structures. Meanwhile, the costs for participation often is transferred to teachers and families—particularly in rural or underserved communities where costs are disproportionately high.

Given these challenges, it is clear that the current budgetary allocation for many school athletics programs is inadequate. To ensure that all students have access to quality sports experiences, there needs to be a broader commitment to increasing funding for school sports. This investment should not only cover the basic needs of equipment and transportation, but also support the development of coaching expertise, inclusivity in sports offerings, and the maintenance of safe, accessible facilities. A more robust budget for school sports will allow schools to offer diverse, high-quality sports programs that promote physical activity, build character, and provide opportunities for students to grow both on and off the field.

**Strategic funding could level the playing field for all students.**





## Centralized Governance and School Sport Policies

In Canada, school sport is decentralized, with provincial and territorial school sport associations operating independently of educational or sport governance models. Discussion participants noted that without consistent standards or coordinated oversight and integration into the education system's core goals, sport too often exists in isolation—focused narrowly on elite athleticism and competition rather than on sport as recreation and a vehicle for development. This lack of a unified national framework leads to significant disparities in how school sport is delivered across the country. These disparities can compromise athlete outcomes. As a result, Physical and Health Educators often take on the coordination role for smaller activities between schools.

**“Students’ access to sport opportunities can vary dramatically based on geography, funding, and local policies. Inconsistent safety protocols, eligibility requirements, coaching qualifications, and support structures mean that some students receive high-quality sport experiences—while others are left behind.”**  
Discussion participant

Compounding this challenge is the current misalignment between school sports and national coaching and safety frameworks, such as the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) and the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS). Although educators are subject to professional codes of conduct and vulnerable sector screening, those volunteering as coaches may lack formal sport knowledge or coaching expertise. As such, coaching standards vary widely, and risk management strategies like emergency planning, concussion response, and travel safety are often left to individual schools or jurisdictions to figure out. This inconsistency creates legal risk and, more importantly, potential harm to students.

Many teacher-coaches and school volunteers may not be familiar with the standards outlined in Safe Sport frameworks or have access to equivalent training offered through the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP).

Additionally, educators often take on the role of “trusted adult”, but without alignment between school and community sport, it can be more difficult for disclosures of abuse to access help. This gap in policy and practice creates vulnerabilities—particularly for marginalized students who already face higher risks of exclusion and mistreatment. Through structured and supportive physical education and school sport programs, students can learn proper techniques to prevent physical injuries, understand the principles of consent and respect, and build awareness of their rights as participants.

Finally, the lack of national oversight results in a serious data gap. There is little consistent information about who is participating in school sport, the quality of their experiences, or the long-term impacts on health, learning, and life outcomes. Moreover, there is no shared mechanism to identify and scale successful practices or address barriers faced by underrepresented groups, including girls, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, Indigenous students, Black and racialized populations, and students with diverse abilities. This absence of data makes it harder to make the case for investment and develop evidence-informed policies or interventions.

A coordinated, federal approach—such as a **Federal School Sport and Physical Activity Framework**—would help address these gaps. By establishing consistent standards, supporting cross-sector collaboration, and promoting safe, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate sport, we can ensure school sport becomes a powerful driver of equity, well-being, and lifelong physical activity for all students. Organizations like PHE Canada are well-positioned to lead this effort, bridging the gap between education and sport to build a more inclusive and effective school sport system across the country.

**“PHE Canada has immense potential to contribute to the school sport landscape across Canada to ensure all students have safe, inclusive, and enriching sport experiences.”**  
Discussion participant.

## Enhanced Teacher Preparation and Recognition

For the most part, schools require teacher-coaches to lead sports teams—a practice grounded in key policy considerations. First, it ensures strong duty of care and supervision, as teachers are bound by professional codes of conduct and held to high standards of accountability. They are trained in child development, trauma-informed approaches, psychological and physical safety, and inclusive practices, which reduces liability and provides a consistent framework for student support. This approach also aligns school sports with broader sport-for-development goals, encouraging teachers to see sport not just as a competitive outcome, but as a powerful means to foster teamwork, leadership, equity, and social-emotional growth. Additionally, teacher-coaches often have established relationships with students, strengthening mentorship, communication, and continuity between classroom learning and extracurriculars. Logistically, relying on teachers is often more cost-effective, as hiring external coaches requires additional resources such as funding, training, and insurance. While volunteer coaches can add capacity, they often lack teaching qualifications, school-specific safety training, and alignment with school policies.

However, physical education teachers and teacher-coaches do not always have the necessary knowledge. Feedback from post-secondary stakeholders indicates a lack of clarity and consistency in the expectations for Physical and Health Education Teacher Education (PHETE) coursework within teacher training programs. In the absence of standardized PHETE learning outcomes or required instructional hours, many teachers graduate without the confidence, knowledge, or practical experience to deliver inclusive, developmentally appropriate physical education. This gap directly undermines the quality and accessibility of sport programming in schools, contributing to low student engagement and reinforcing inequities in physical activity participation.

One participant noted that **“they’re not mandated to take a physical education course and yet it is something they’re expected to teach.”**

Collectively, we heard that while the purpose of post-secondary education is to equip future educators with the knowledge and skills necessary for success, the absence of mandatory physical education requirements within teacher education program expectations highlights a critical gap. As explained by one discussion participant, the decision to make “physical education courses elective for pre-service teachers undermines the development of a well-rounded educator and creates a ripple effect, where **students receive varying levels of physical education instruction depending on the background and training of their teacher educators.**”

This undervaluing of physical activity is carried forward into the school setting where the role of teacher-coaches is not recognized with compensation, release time, or professional development. With the current model heavily reliant on teacher volunteers—many of whom face burnout, limited professional incentives, and increasing demands—schools are struggling to attract and retain good coaches, to meet student demands and interests.

**“Since COVID-19, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of teacher-coaches volunteering for school sports, even as student interest in participating continues to grow. This gap will have long-term consequences—particularly for the development of future athletes and the overall strength of the sport system in Canada. The impact is especially severe for marginalized students, who often rely on school-based opportunities as their primary or only access point to organized sport.” Discussion participant**

This lack of investment in school-based coaching can directly impact the quality of instruction, the development of student-athletes, and the overall success of the programs.

**Educating young people about their right to safe sport in physical education—including how to recognize inappropriate behaviour, protect themselves, and understand whistleblower rights—can empower them to participate with confidence and security.** This knowledge fosters a culture of respect, accountability, and self-advocacy, where students feel safe speaking up and seeking help when needed. By embedding these lessons in schooling and modelling this in school sport programs, students can develop the protective behaviours and skills to promote lifelong values of fairness, inclusion, and personal agency—key pillars of a healthy sport environment and responsible citizenship.

At the secondary level, students must earn at least one credit in physical and health education to graduate—except in Manitoba, where two credits are required. Physical education settings offer a vital and largely untapped opportunity to educate young people about injury prevention, personal safety, and their rights, all of which are foundational to a broader safe sport culture.

**If all young people in Canada knew their rights in sport and had the tools to advocate and protect themselves—particularly around safety, inclusion, and whistleblower protections—it would mark a transformative shift in the culture of Canadian sport.** A generation of empowered, informed athletes would drive higher standards of accountability from coaches, schools, and sport organizations.

This awareness would help prevent abuse, discrimination, and unsafe practices, while encouraging more positive, respectful environments that support long-term participation. Over time, this shift could rebuild trust in sport systems, reduce harm, and create a more equitable and accessible sport landscape—one where every child, regardless of background, feels safe, valued, and inspired to stay involved in sport for life.

In addition to structured physical education classes, schools across the country are required to provide Daily Physical Activity (DPA), which may include fitness sessions, weight training, school sports, intramurals, outings like the Terry Fox Run, community-organized programs, and personal interest activities such as swimming lessons or bike clubs. As some jurisdictions move away from DPA, PHE Canada advocates for movement based pedagogy.

**Specifically, PHE Canada is advocating for 10% of all instructional time in K-12 schools to use movement-based pedagogy.** This essential shift would enhance student learning and engagement while promoting well-being. Furthermore, it would thoughtfully integrate and foster a holistic approach to education that benefits all students (Truth & Reconciliation Call 10.iii.) and create a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment that nurtures the body, mind, and spirit and help close the gap (Truth & Reconciliation Call 10.i.).

To fully realize this potential requires deeper collaboration between educational institutions and intermediaries to clarify expectations, and invest in sustained professional learning for educators, coaches, and volunteers. Collectively, we can create a safer, more inclusive, and developmentally appropriate model of school sport.





## WE NEED CONCRETE ACTION

**If we are serious about increasing participation—especially for those who face barriers—schools must be at the centre of realizing a new and safer future for sports.**

From the time students first enter school until they complete their formal schooling, children and youth spend more time in school than in any other place outside their homes. While attending school, educational institutions serve as vital incubators where children and youth develop into healthy, knowledgeable, and active citizens. This growth happens not only in the classroom but throughout the entire school day, where students engage in a range of experiences—including physical education, physical activity, and school sports. The impact of these activities cannot be overstated. Just consider the inspiring journeys of athletes like Andre De Grasse, Desiree Isaac-Pictou and Perdita Felicien, whose podium successes were sparked and nurtured by their schools.

There are three compelling reasons why concrete action is not only necessary—but urgent—that schools be placed at the heart of efforts to build the future of sport in Canada:

### 1) The Timing is Critical

Early intervention matters. Regular physical activity is essential for lifelong health, yet today's young people are moving less than ever before and spending more time sedentary. Habits formed during childhood and adolescence have lasting impacts on health and well-being. Schools have unparalleled reach and influence during these crucial developmental years. Moreover, physical and health education spaces offer an unparalleled opportunity to ensure young people are knowledgeable about how to prevent injury and harm, their rights, and the supports accessible to them.

### 2) Schools Are Canada's Most Equitable Point of Access

Participation in school sports among children and youth nearly doubled after the pandemic, rising from 24% in 2020 to 48% in [2023](#). Over half (51%) of youth depend on school as their primary access to sport. However, this growth is not experienced equally. Girls are 10% less likely to participate in school sports compared to boys. Additionally, 54% of students who play school sports do not participate in physical activity outside of school. Among these inactive students, 32% identify as girls, young women, or gender diverse individuals, and many come from lower-income families or live in rural areas.

### 3) The Need for Multi-Sectoral Partnership and Action is Clear

Recreation, government, and education cannot tackle this challenge alone. While screen time is often blamed, the root causes of non-participation are far more complex—embedded in how we design our communities, schools, infrastructure, and cultural norms around safety, recreation, and play. Addressing this requires a whole-of-society approach. Education systems and the sport and recreation sectors must work in direct partnership with all levels of government. **Together, we can realize the opportunities that school sport and physical activity can provide.**



## THE FUTURE OF SPORT - PHE CANADA'S RECOMMENDATIONS

We call for strengthening physical education, school-based activity, and school sport through coordinated federal leadership in three ways:

### 1. A Coordinated Federal Strategy

PHE Canada is calling for the development of a Federal School Sport and Physical Activity Framework as a critical and powerful avenue to improve school-based physical education, physical activity and sport opportunities, and community use of schools. This framework can establish relationships to facilitate funding and resource distribution through intermediaries to ensure greater inclusion and higher participation rates, making physical activity and sport accessible to all students across Canada—not just the most skilled or those already active.

Moreover, it can create dedicated financial pathways to build the capacity of schools as physical activity and sport hubs and ensure that school staff are supported with enabling policies and infrastructure that makes school facilities more adaptable and accessible for diverse use.

The development of this framework will unfold in three key phases:

### Phase 1: Listening and Learning

Launch a Federal School Sport Table led by PHE Canada in collaboration with Sport Canada to identify structural and jurisdictional barriers, gaps, and opportunities. This phase will include a school-based survey capturing the perspectives of administrators, educators, students, school staff, and parents / caregivers.

### Phase 2: Framework Development

Using the findings from Phase 1, co-create a Federal School Sport and Physical Activity Framework that includes equitable, consistent, and safe community access to school facilities outside instructional hours. This will involve engagement and the adoption of the framework within provincial, First Nations, and territorial education authorities and unions to reflect the realities and needs of the broader school ecosystem.

### Phase 3: Capacity Building

Equipping schools and teacher-coaches with the capacity to offer safe, inclusive, and equitable introductions to sport, including recreational and competitive opportunities—before, during, and after the school day—as well as through sport for development initiatives.



### The Federal School Sport Table Goals:

- Develop and share guidelines that promote equitable access to sports for all students, irrespective of gender, ability, or socio-economic status.
- Provide recommendations for systemic changes to enhance the overall framework of school sports in Canada.
- Collaborate with FTP and First Nation bodies to advocate for policies that support safe, inclusive, and engaging school sports programs.
- Create multi-sectoral initiatives that engage and support teacher-coaches, and community members, to build a sustainable school sport network.



## 2. Targeted Investment in Physical Education, School Physical Activity, and Inclusive School Sports

To make meaningful progress in supporting school sport, physical education, and daily physical activity, new investments are urgently required across multiple fronts—including policy development, educator training, inclusive programming, and infrastructure. Schools must be equipped to serve as vibrant hubs for physical activity by incentivizing the community use of facilities before, during, and after school. This approach expands access, meets the diverse needs of students, and promotes lifelong active habits. Building internal capacity is key—national organizations like PHE Canada play a vital role in delivering high-quality, evidence-based programs that support both educators and students.

**To achieve this, clear financial pathways need to be created between Sport Canada and Multi-Sport Organizations as intermediaries to ensure direct support to physical education spaces, physical activity, and school sport.**

## 3. A Modernized Physical Activity and Sport Act That Fully Integrates the Education Sector

The Physical Activity and Sport Act must reflect current challenges related to inactivity and inequity and recognize the school environment as a primary setting for intervention. It should prioritize partnerships that centre schools—leveraging physical education, movement based pedagogy, physical activity, intra- and interscholastic sports—as foundational platforms for sport introduction, competition, and sport for development. Moreover, it should make equal space for sport beyond elite competition to include a full spectrum of developmentally appropriate offerings—such as sport for recreation and non-competitive activities—ensuring that all students, regardless of skill level or background, can experience the joy and benefits of movement and belonging through sport.

**Without explicit recognition of the education system's role, the Physical Activity and Sport Act misses a key lever for lifelong engagement in sport.**







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