



Erosion of Physical and Health Education
in Canada

December 2024

Physical and Health Education Canada

Thinkers Report



All discussions and information presented below are for informational purposes only and are meant to mirror those held at the PHE Canada National Conference in May 2019.

Introduction

In May 2019, Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada hosted the first PHE Thinkers Gathering in Montreal, bringing together over 100 leaders, including school principals, university deans, academics, classroom teachers, and school system administrators from across the country. This dynamic event served as a critical platform to address pressing challenges within the education sector, particularly the concerning decline of Physical and Health Education (PHE) within Canada's educational framework.

The gathering revealed a troubling trend: despite widespread recognition of

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Participants shared their professional expertise, personal experiences, and insights from academic and school communities, highlighting the urgent need for systemic change. Discussions underscored the

decline of Physical and Health Education Teacher Education (PHETE) programs and the significant negative impact this has on the health, well-being, and future of Canada's youth.

Grounded in a grassroots approach, the Thinkers Gathering fostered a collaborative space where stakeholders worked together to generate actionable strategies and inspire solutions. By sparking meaningful dialogue and encouraging cross-sector collaboration, the event reinforced the need to prioritize PHE as an essential component of Canada's education system and ensure every child and youth can lead an active, healthy life.

This is a synopsis of the conversation that occurred.

Erosion of Physical and Health Education in Canada

Results from the 2019 PHE Canada Thinkers Gathering

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The Critical Role of Physical and Health Education

The necessity for a comprehensive evaluation and assessment of the current status of PHE in Canada was articulated by PHE Canada's Provinces and Territories (CoPT). This enduring table of provincial and territory physical and health association presidents aims to establish a unified approach to physical education instruction in classrooms. PHE Canada's Research Council (PHE RC) has concurrently been contending with the consequences of discontinuing undergraduate Physical Health Education Teacher Education (PHETE) programs on doctorate programs, research, and involvement. This exercise represented the inaugural occasion on which PHE Canada convened these groups to assess research and the experiences of those at the forefront of physical and health education together. PHE Canada solicited responses to five key questions from its close collaborators to facilitate the discussion.



Photo: Conference marketplace (up) and a plenary session (down) at the 2019 PHE National Conference. The 2019 PHE National Conference was held at McGill University in May 2019, where Thinkers Gathering took place for the first time at the same time as the National Conference.



FIVE KEY QUESTIONS

- How do you perceive the role of PHE within the Canadian educational system, and what implications does this have for your position?
- What particular modifications do you wish to observe?
- What actions or assistance do you require from PHE Canada? What are your capabilities?
- What methods may we employ to acquire further information regarding this matter? Who else should be included?
- How can we connect initiatives to respond effectively?



Challenges in Physical and Health Education Teacher Education

Physical and Health Education (PHE) is recognized as a vital component of a child's holistic development, fostering cognitive growth, emotional well-being, and physical health. However, as schools increasingly prioritize improving student performance in numeracy and literacy, Physical and Health Education (PHE) in Canada has suffered. At the same time, international advisory groups like the United Nations and the World Health Organization push for schools to be environments that nurture the comprehensive development of the whole child—socially, emotionally, physically, and mentally. For students to become responsible and productive members of society, they require an education that prepares them

not only for academic tasks but for the broader challenges and opportunities in life. In this context, PHE is crucial for promoting long-term student health and well-being.

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The responses confirmed that PHE is a vital subject. Simultaneously, significant questions regarding the viability of PHE within Canada's educational framework were articulated. Furthermore, a depiction of a detrimental feedback loop materialized. Disrupting this detrimental feedback loop necessitates

a unified and collaborative endeavour by all stakeholders in the educational system.

A key issue discussed by the participants was the inadequacy of teacher preparation in PHE. Many educators, particularly those in generalist roles, feel unprepared to deliver quality PHE instruction. Teacher education programs often lack sufficient focus on PHE, with many faculties dedicating only limited hours to its instruction. For example, **the allocation of just 8 hours for both physical and health education combined in teacher training is inadequate to equip educators with the necessary skills and confidence to effectively teach the subject.** This lack of preparation leads to stress and a lack of engagement in delivering PHE, particularly among in-service generalist educators.

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Moreover, the decline of specialized PHETE programs has compounded the issue. Canada currently has only 22 PHETE programs, a number that has decreased significantly in recent years, such as the closure of the program at Queen's University in 2017. The termination of these programs is often justified by financial constraints, but this decision triggers a chain reaction that impacts the entire educational system. **As PHETE programs disappear, schools are left with a smaller pool of qualified PHE specialists, diminishing the quality of PHE instruction and, consequently, student engagement in the subject.** This cycle perpetuates the marginalization of PHE and reduces the number of students who are motivated to pursue PHE as a career.

The primary objective of Physical and Health Education (PHE)

programming is to cultivate students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for leading physically active and healthy lifestyles. **Modern PHE focuses on the comprehensive development of the child, addressing their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It is distinct in its approach as the only subject in the curriculum that targets the holistic development of students.** PHE should not be confined to a separate, often elective, credit course but must remain a core subject with emphasis in contemporary educational institutions. Without proper inclusion of healthy, active-living skills in curricula, students' well-being is at risk.

Despite the critical importance of PHE, **there is a significant gap in understanding what a modern PHE curriculum should entail.** Both students

and educators often lack a clear comprehension of the evolving nature of the subject. This lack of clarity is exacerbated by the absence of national guidelines and a repository of provincial curricula, which leaves a deficiency in aligning best practices and evidence-based, practitioner-validated materials. The absence of a cohesive framework across jurisdictions prevents the full potential of PHE from being realized and restricts access to resources that could improve program delivery. **A nationwide rebranding of the subject may be necessary to challenge outdated perceptions of PHE as simply "gym class"** and to emphasize its broader role in promoting physical literacy, health, and wellness.

The Need for Systemic Change

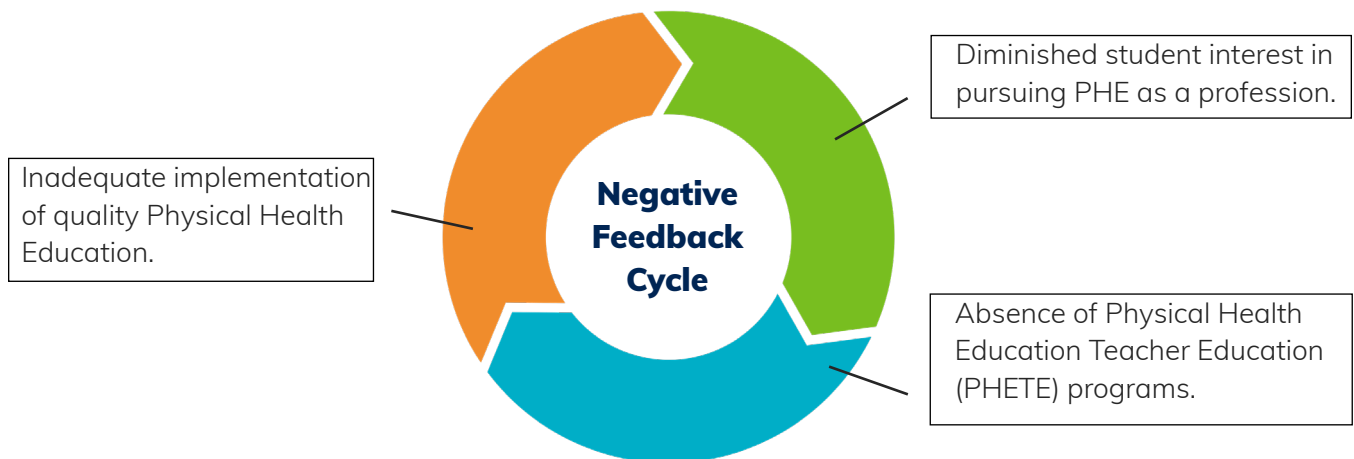
The decline of specialized PHETE programs has far-reaching consequences. Without qualified PHE specialists, schools struggle to offer quality PHE instruction, leading to decreased student interest in the subject and a lack of physical activity among youth. Furthermore, the absence of trained faculty in higher education institutions affects research and the development of new teaching methods, further hindering the advancement of PHE as a discipline. PHE specialists are essential to instill in children and adolescents the motivation, knowledge, and skills needed to appreciate the value of health-promoting activities and develop lifelong physical literacy.

A unified, national approach to PHETE is essential. **There is currently a lack of consistency in PHETE curricula and program durations across Canada.** Standardized

expectations for PHETE degrees should be established to ensure that all educators are adequately prepared to teach PHE, whether they are generalists or specialists. Additionally, more teaching hours should be dedicated to PHE in teacher education programs to ensure that all teacher candidates are equipped with the competencies needed to teach physical and health education effectively. This disorder fosters a sense of ambiguity within the profession regarding the different demands of future classrooms upon graduation. This consequently influences choices to terminate PHETE programs. This thus diminishes schools' capacity to employ PHE specialists. This results in the assignment of inadequately competent educators, thereby diminishing the quality of implementation. **Consequently, there is a decline in student motivation for PHE programming and a reduced interest in pursuing it as a career.** While faculties of education rationalize their decision to terminate PHE

programs due to the diminishing need for specialist teacher positions post-graduation, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels, they also contribute to this decline.

This exemplifies the negative feedback cycle; as PHETE programs serve as the conduit for preparing the next generation of PHETE faculty, there are—and will persist—issues in securing adequately qualified persons for roles in higher education institutions. Inadequate implementation of quality Physical Health Education (PHE) will result in diminished student interest in pursuing PHE as a profession, and the absence of Physical Health Education Teacher Education (PHETE) programs will lead to a lack of confidence and abilities among educators to deliver quality PHE. The correlation between this and the efficacy of PHE implementation is evident. Furthermore, UNESCO asserts that a deficiency of specialists constitutes a substantial obstacle to inclusion.



Another casualty is the trend to retire PHETE faculty without replacing them with tenured employment. This condition exacerbates the circumstances in Canada. The absence of dedicated new academic members to do research will impede the growth of knowledge. This deceleration affects the quality of implementation and the consideration of the dynamic and intersectional demands of contemporary pupils. Shortages of PHE faculty may adversely affect the availability of expert teachers to meet demand. Specialized educators are essential to instill in students the motivation, confidence, knowledge, and understanding necessary to appreciate health-promoting activities in their lives. Individuals are more inclined to assume responsibility for their own participation and enhance their 'physical and health literacy' if they encounter great physical and health education during the initial stages of development.

At the classroom level, the current state of PHE is undermined by insufficient focus in teacher education programs, leading to a shortage of qualified PHE educators in schools. This gap in the system prevents the achievement of whole-child education, as students' physical, emotional, and social needs remain unaddressed. Furthermore, the negative perceptions of PHE, fueled by outdated views of it as mere "gym class," continue

to marginalize the subject. A transformation in how PHE is approached—emphasizing its comprehensive, inclusive, and holistic nature—is necessary for students' overall development. Systemic changes, such as the rebranding of PHE, the integration of PHE as a core subject, and the development of enabling policies and resources, are crucial for ensuring that every student benefits from quality physical and health education.

In recent years, there has been a community-wide and sympathetic call to action for the reduction of sedentary lifestyles and for schools to contribute to the development of health-promoting behaviours among young people. Indeed, PHE is the critical and equitable solution. Schools are the only social institution with the ability to reach virtually all children regardless of gender, age, ability, culture, religion, or socio-economic status. Schools provide a prime opportunity to support the optimal development of children and youth equitably. Moreover, evidence tells us that 51% of these children do not participate in sports outside of the school day.

Given what we know, it is no surprise that up to 30% of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years, often due to the overwhelming demands of the job. Non-specialist teachers, in particular, are hesitant to

teach PHE because they feel unprepared to deliver effective lessons. Research has shown that access to skilled mentors can help alleviate these challenges and improve the implementation of PHE. To address this issue, PHE Canada, in collaboration with PHETE educators, should prioritize the creation and promotion of sustainable mentorship programs. **A nationwide approach to mentorship is essential to ensure consistency and equity across jurisdictions, supporting the development of skilled, confident educators who can advance the field of PHE in Canada.** A key factor in improving the effectiveness of PHE programs is the implementation of comprehensive and sustainable mentorship programs. Mentorship is essential for equipping educators with the tools, research, and support they need to enhance student achievement and deliver high-quality learning experiences. A robust network of PHE teacher-mentors can foster a reciprocal cycle of support among cooperating teachers, novice educators, and both generalist and specialist instructors. However, this system can only succeed if PHETE students receive mentorship from confident and capable instructors. The decline in PHETE programs has led to fewer tenured positions and less access to quality mentorship, making it even more critical to invest in these initiatives. The discussion among



KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

stakeholders revealed several key points for moving forward:

1. Standardize PHETE programs

There is a need for consistent expectations for specialized PHETE degrees across Canada to ensure that all educators, regardless of their background, are adequately prepared to teach PHE.

2. Increase teaching hours

Faculties of Education must augment the number of hours to a minimum of 50 hours dedicated to PHE instruction in all teacher education programs to ensure that all educators are sufficiently trained.

3. Invest in doctoral training

Effective doctoral training in PHE is critical for the future sustainability of the profession. With fewer specialized PHETE programs, there is a decreasing number of researchers and educators to support the discipline's advancement.

4. Address the marginalization of PHE

The marginalization of PHE in the school day must be addressed through policy reforms that prioritize PHE as a core subject, on par with other essential areas of the curriculum like literacy and numeracy.

5. Support for generalist educators

In-service generalist teachers need additional support, including professional development opportunities, to build their confidence and competencies in delivering PHE instruction effectively.



Conclusion

The 2019 discussion convened by PHE Canada highlighted a critical moment in the trajectory of physical and health education in Canada. Despite the challenges facing PHE, there was unanimous agreement on its importance to the development of students and the need for a comprehensive, systemic approach to revitalizing PHE instruction. By addressing the gaps in teacher preparation, increasing the allocation of time and resources to PHE, and advocating for a national strategy to standardize PHETE programs, we can work toward ensuring that every student in Canada has access to high-quality physical and health education. This will not only enhance their physical health but also foster their overall well-being, helping them to succeed academically and in life.

It is essential to acknowledge and appreciate a comprehensive, holistic, and inclusive approach

For change to be effective, obsolete misconceptions regarding ‘gym’ classes as solely a venue for athletic development, sports, and competition must be dispelled.

to physical and health education. This entails providing a set of enabling, system-wide policies that allocate time and resources to deliver a curriculum that is adaptable, dynamic, and sensitive to the different abilities and interests of young individuals. We aim to address the comprehensive needs of young individuals and guide them towards a lifelong trajectory of achievement.

To strengthen PHE programs across Canada, those present identified that PHE Canada should lead in establishing and disseminating a comprehensive

repository of provincial curricula. This should be accompanied by the development of national standards or competencies to ensure consistent and enhanced support for PHE across the country. Such efforts would not only provide clarity and uniformity but also support the effective delivery of PHE programs nationwide. By promoting a unified approach, PHE can achieve greater national cohesion and align teaching practices with modern educational goals.

We aspire that, via these discussions, PHE Canada can advocate for comprehensive action among practitioners, academics, and policymakers, therefore enhancing the significance of PHE as a fundamental and proactive approach to fostering student learning, health, and well-being. We aspire to counteract the tendencies of increasing marginalization of PHE that today jeopardize the health and well-being of Canada’s youth.



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