

IT'S TIME TO LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD FOR GIRLS

Physical activity is linked with numerous health, social and educational benefits. Girls shouldn't be left on the sidelines. GENYOUth asked educators about their needs and ideas for making a difference right now.

Fewer than one in four school-aged youth meets recommended physical activity guidelines despite the health and learning benefits physical activity provides.ⁱ Experts have called on schools to adopt more strategies to help youth participate in high-quality physical education (P.E.) and other physical activity opportunities before, during and after school. Schools and educators also are considering issues of equity, inclusion and accessibility as well as students' social and emotional well-being in the context of health, P.E. and other physical activities.

The challenge of achieving physical activity guidelines is even greater for girls. Significant gender inequities exist when it comes to physical activity and sport.

- ▶ Between ages 5 and 10, girls and boys participate in physical activity at similarly high rates. However, by adolescence, the participation rate for adolescent girls is 20 percent lower.ⁱⁱ
- ▶ By high school, only 18 percent of girls participate in 60 minutes of physical activity every day compared with 36 percent of boys.ⁱ
- ▶ The situation is more pronounced for young women in underserved communities and young women of color who have less access to athletic programs and engage in less physical activity.ⁱⁱⁱ

And as for sports specifically,

- ▶ By age 14, girls are dropping out of sport one and a half times faster than boys.^{iv}
- ▶ Girls' participation in sports begins to decline at age 9 and drops sharply in their teen years.^{iv}
- ▶ If a girl has not participated in sport by age 10, she is only 10 percent as likely to be physically active as an adult.^v

Since its launch in 2010, more than 75,000 schools have enrolled in GENYOUth's [Fuel Up to Play 60](#)



program — representing more than two-thirds of all schools in the U.S., which enroll over 40 million students. Fuel Up to Play 60 helps schools increase access to healthy foods and opportunities for students to be active before, during and after the school day. Since 2014, GENYOUth's [NFL FLAG-In-Schools](#) program has offered an estimated 13 million girls and boys the opportunity to develop a love of sport through flag football.

To uncover more opportunities to help increase physical activity among girls, GENYOUth conducted a series of research efforts in May through July 2021 with physical education teachers and administrators from across the U.S.

Key Findings

DECREASING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AMONG GIRLS AS THEY GROW UP: A MAJOR CONCERN FOR EDUCATORS

- ▶ Nearly three in four P.E. teachers observe that **girls' participation in physical activity decreases as they move into middle and high school.**
- ▶ **This decline is a big concern among P.E. teachers.** Nearly all of the educators who are seeing a decline in girls' physical activity levels (91%) say they are concerned or extremely concerned.

"We've got to get our middle school girls involved [in physical activity] so it carries on to high school because that seems to be where we're losing them."

— P.E. Coordinator, Atlanta Public Schools

WHAT'S STOPPING GIRLS FROM BEING ACTIVE?

- **Lack of Confidence**
- **Intimidating Sports Culture**
- **Concerns about Physical Appearance**

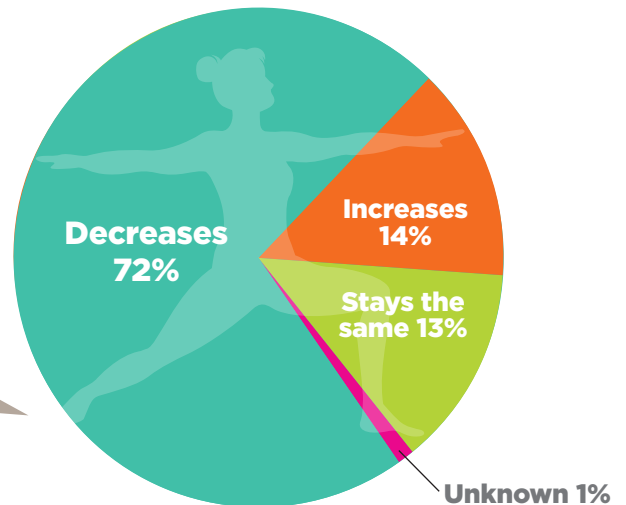
P.E. teachers say that many girls simply don't see themselves fitting in with, or succeeding at, traditional sports and physical activities. Support systems and the broader physical activity/sport environment is letting them down and leaving too many girls out.

- ▶ 81% of educators say girls lack confidence in their skills/abilities to participate in physical activity and sports.
- ▶ 77% of educators say girls' concern about their physical appearance — fear of being judged on their appearance or body image issues — prevents them from being more active.

"We're struggling. I can see that the level of physical activity and participation among girls starts to wane." — Athletic Conference Leader, Miami-Dade Public Schools

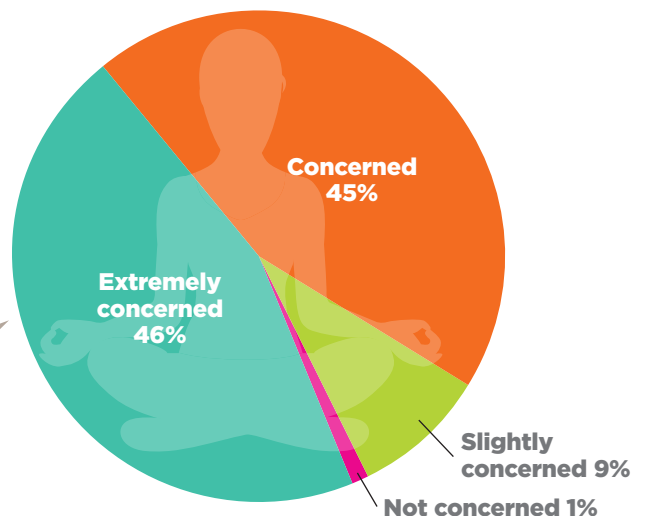
P.E. Teachers' Observation of Physical Activity Levels

As girls move into middle and high school, their level of participation in physical activity...

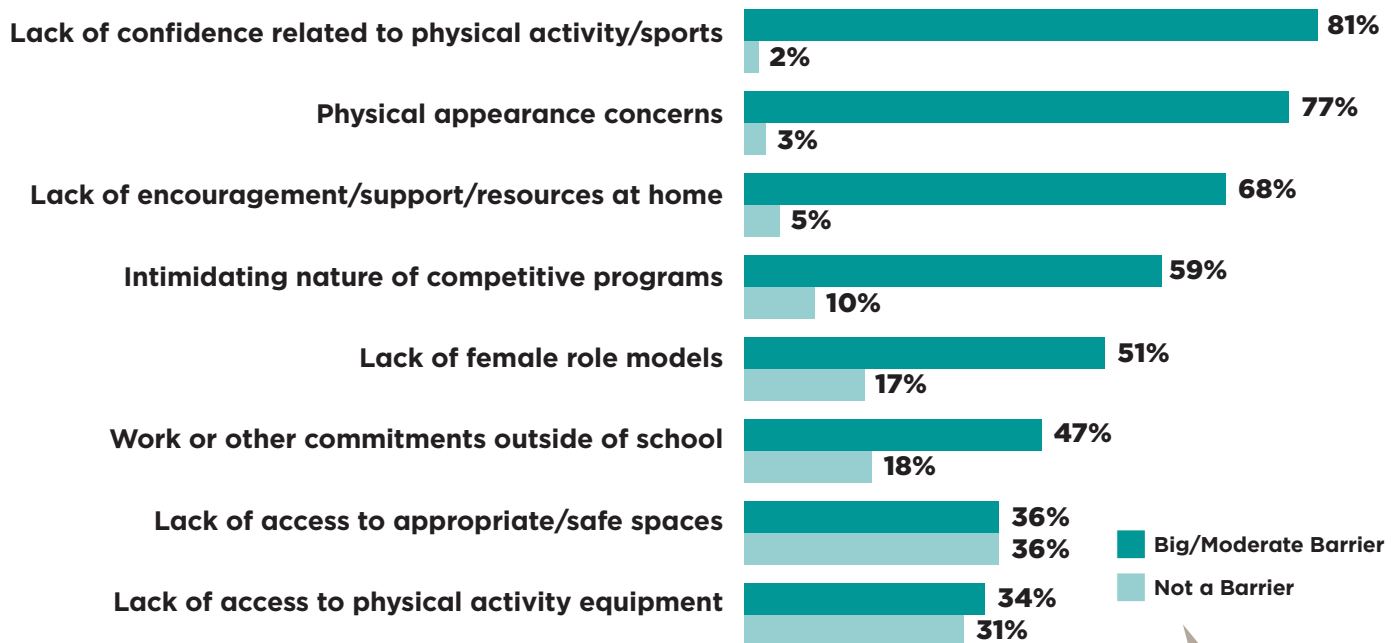


Concern about Declining Level of Physical Activity among Girls

91% of P.E. teachers are concerned about declining physical activity as girls age.



BARRIERS TO GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



- ▶ 68% of educators say lack of encouragement/support/resources at home are a barrier.
- ▶ Other key barriers cited by educators: feeling intimidated by competitive sports culture (cited by 59%) and lack of female role models to inspire girls (cited by 51%).

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

- **More Support**
- **More Attention**
- **More Physical Activity Opportunities**

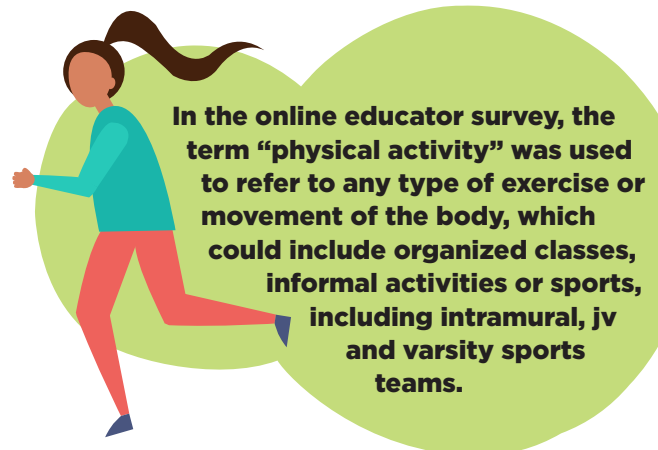
When presented with a variety of ideas to address decreasing levels of physical activity among girls as they age, P.E. teachers prioritized two strategies:

- ▶ **Help girls build the confidence** to believe and see they can be physically active and have a positive body image (84%) and
- ▶ Help ensure that schools **give similar levels of support and attention to girls' physical activity/sports** as for boys (71%).

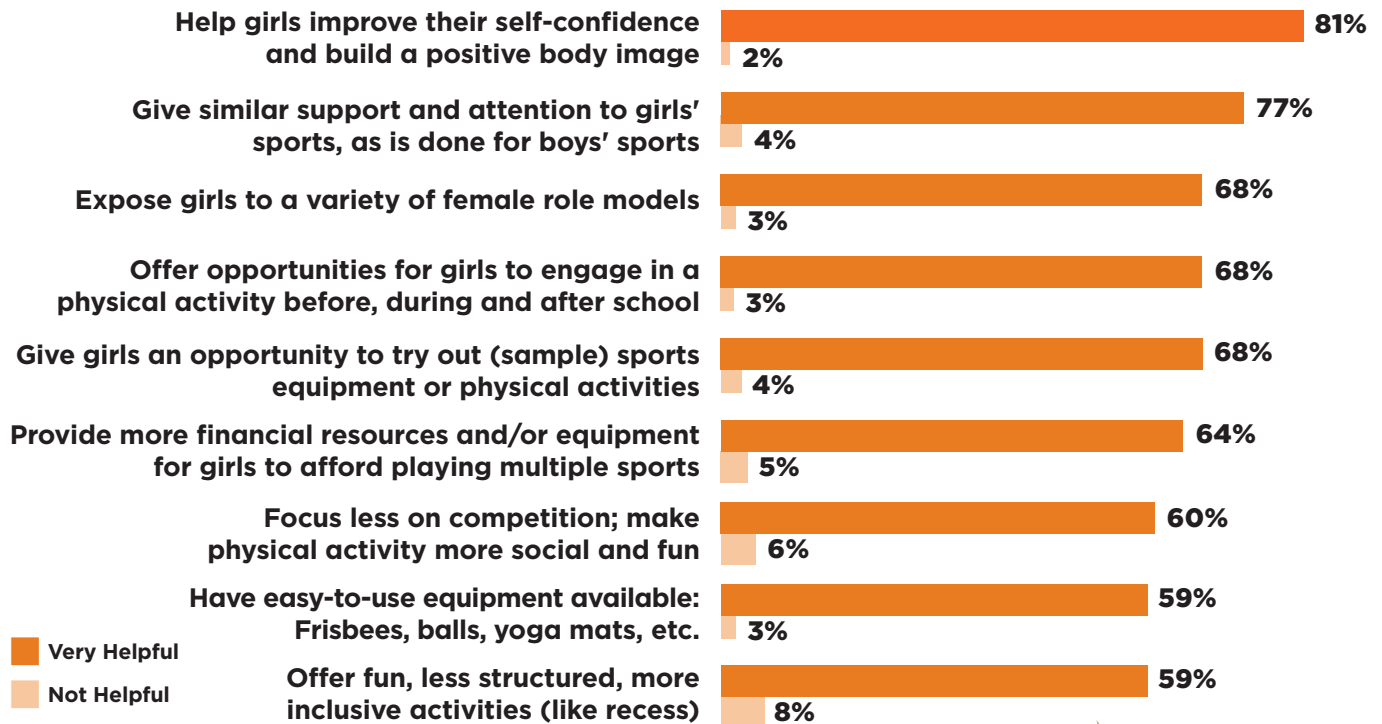
Also, important strategies: more female role models; more equipment and funding; and more fun, non-competitive opportunities for girls to engage in physical activity.

“Girls need to feel emotionally safe in order to feel comfortable enough to be physically active. I think the root of this issue is how they feel about themselves. Building up their self-esteem and empowering them through social-emotional learning activities is key.”

— P.E. Teacher, San Diego Unified School District



WAYS TO INCREASE GIRLS' PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



COMPELLING AND IMPACTFUL OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE GIRLS' PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The survey presented P.E. teachers with several intervention ideas to increase physical activity among girls as they move into middle and high school. Survey responses shed important light on the kinds of interventions that would be most exciting, unique and impactful, and that P.E. teachers wish they could offer to girls right now.

A key insight to emerge is that, while important and part of the equation, **more sports/P.E. equipment is only the beginning**. Girls need to feel good about themselves, have access to activities that are inclusive and social, and that encourage, support and even track their engagement.

According to survey results, P.E. teachers feel the key elements of a successful intervention would include:

- ▶ Programs and initiatives that aim to **build girls' self-esteem and confidence, promote teamwork,**

“Offer more than just regular gym classes. Girls still feel intimidated in that environment but put them in a yoga class and they shine and grow stronger. Mindfulness is the way.”

— P.E. Teacher, New York City Department of Education

prioritize socializing, cooperation and sense of community over competition.

- ▶ A physical **kit with products, equipment and supporting materials plus a wrap-around program** that supports ongoing engagement through theme-based activities and accountability drivers like activity trackers.

The vast majority of P.E. teachers (88%+) say that an approach or intervention with these elements would make a big difference in getting more girls moving. These data show the **powerful opportunity to fill a gap** in what is currently offered to girls by responding to their needs and motivators around physical activity.

Getting More Girls Moving: Time to Make a Difference

The insights from this GENYOUth research came through loud and clear: We need to level the playing field and provide girls with the kinds of programs and activities that put their needs first. By connecting physical activity and sport to competition, many girls are left behind and miss important opportunities to reap the benefits of being physically active. Every child deserves to be supported, to feel good about themselves and their body and to feel that **their** physical activity is a priority within their schools.

As part of its commitment to creating healthier school communities, GENYOUth is exploring opportunities to bring positive, impactful and urgently needed new resources, approaches and support to increase girls' participation in physical activity. To learn more about how you can join us, visit www.genyouthnow.org.

“Give female students a voice when they have ideas or want to participate. If they can’t be heard, no one will ever know their thoughts. Participation is key. Listening is the other piece to the puzzle. We must give them the confidence to speak about the things they want and need to stay physically, mentally and emotionally happy each and every day.”

— P.E. Teacher, Coatesville Area School District, PA



Read more about the importance of physical activity and what's at stake in GENYOUth's report on **Physical Activity: A Crucial Pillar of School Wellness**

METHODOLOGY

Focus Groups: A series of three virtual focus group sessions conducted between May 6 and 13, 2021, with 12 district-level physical education leaders from seven school districts across the country: Atlanta, Portland (OR), Los Angeles, Seattle, Baltimore, Dallas and Miami-Dade, representing 1,860+ schools and nearly 12 million students. The focus group discussions surfaced insights into the challenges and potential solutions to the nationwide concern of girls' declining participation in physical activity as they grow up.

Online survey: Conducted from June 22-July 4, 2021 with 535 middle school and high school P.E. teachers/administrators from 47 states representing 327 school districts. Participating districts were primarily from suburban (41%) and urban (50%) locations; three-quarters of the districts serve a high free/reduced meal participation rate (40%+); 60% have a high percentage (50%+) of minority students; and 70% of the districts have enrollments of 10K+ students.

GENYOUTH

CREATING HEALTHIER SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

GENYOUth empowers students to create a healthier future for themselves and their peers by convening a network of private and public partners to raise funds for youth wellness initiatives that bolster healthy, high-achieving students, schools and communities. We believe that all students are change-agents who deserve the opportunity identify and lead innovative solutions that positively impact nutrition, physical activity and success. www.genyouthnow.org

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ National Physical Activity Plan Alliance. The 2018 United States report card on physical activity for children and youth. 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.physicalactivityplan.org/projects/reportcard.html>
- ⁱⁱ The Council of Economic Advisers. The potential for youth sports to improve childhood outcomes. May 2018. Retrieved from <https://nationalsbla.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-Potential-for-Youth-Sports-to-Improve-Childhood-Outcomes.pdf>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Zanin AC, Preston SL, Adame EA. Athletic Identity Transformation: A Qualitative Drawing Analysis of Implicit Constructions of Athletes, Girls, and the Self. *Communication & Sport*. 2021;9(3):395-417. doi:10.1177/2167479519867704
- ^{iv} Zarrett N, Veliz PT, Sabo D. Keeping girls in the game: factors that influence sport participation. Women's Sports Foundation. 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Keeping-Girls-in-the-Game-Executive-Summary-FINAL-web.pdf>
- ^v Linda Bunker, University of Virginia, 1989. Unpublished data. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED418935.pdf>