

# Shaping the Future of Physical Activity & P.E.

School P.E. programs offer the promise of equitable access to physical activity, but need more support and youth-informed improvements

**Physical activity is critical to the well-being of children and youth. Recommendations from the [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#) and the [World Health Organization](#) and [UNESCO](#) underscore the need for 60 minutes or more of daily physical activity for youth. Coupled with adequate and proper nutrition this regimen helps to enhance fitness, cardiometabolic vitality, healthy weight, and bone health; improve cognitive development and outcomes; boost social and emotional well-being; and foster social interactions and connectedness.**

Yet data from the CDC’s 2021 [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System](#) (YRBSS) reveal a stark reality: fewer than one in four youth actually meet daily physical activity minimums — which means youth are not gaining the related multiple physical, cognitive, and mental health benefits.

To better understand the reasons behind the inactivity crisis, GENYOUth surveyed over 1,000 middle and high school students about their physical activity behaviors, barriers to participation in physical activity, and their suggestions for increasing participation and engagement.

The findings, summarized in this research brief, provide a window into student behaviors and perceptions, and point to clear opportunities that can have a real and positive impact. Among the key takeaways:

- School-based physical education (P.E.) class is the primary setting where youth are physically active.
- Many schools do not deliver P.E. programs and options that motivate students.

- P.E. programs could benefit from new thinking and youth-informed improvements to enhance participation.
- There is a pressing need to support quality P.E. programs and implement actionable solutions.



## GENYOUth Insights reveal:

### School-based P.E. class is the top source of youth physical activity.

- ▶ 54% of youth survey respondents take P.E. weekly and 74% take P.E. at some point during the school year. Participation drops in high school as P.E. is less likely to be required.
- ▶ Encouragingly, students recognize the benefits of physical activity including improved self-confidence, appearance, energy, mood, and academic performance.

### Yet there is room for improvement.

- ▶ When it comes to P.E., fun is fundamental; youth want options that are enjoyable and social.
- ▶ Students want a judgment-free and supportive P.E. experience that meets them where they are relative to skill and body consciousness.



**Thank you to the GENYOUth [National Youth Council](#) and [Youth Insights Advisory Council](#) experts who provided invaluable perspective on this report.**

Today’s students have a strong sense of responsibility for their health and wellness. We know because we ask them. GENYOUth **INSIGHTS** elevates youth voice through original, timely research on topics that matter to students and to healthy, high-achieving schools.

This report was produced in counsel with David Bersoff, PhD, Head of Research at the Edelman Trust Institute.

# Youth Physical Inactivity: Continuing Cause for Concern

## NOT MEETING THE MINIMUMS.

For decades, we’ve been aware of the increase in sedentary behavior among American young people. Fewer than 1 in 4 youth ages 6 to 17 get the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity.

We also know that on average, teens spend over 7 hours a day on screen time, not including time spent on schoolwork. Meanwhile, girls lag behind boys in level of engagement in physical activity and sport, and nearly 60% of American children lack cardiorespiratory fitness (CRF), according to an [American Heart Association Scientific Statement](#).

## P.E. CLASS AS SOLUTION.

Schools are [uniquely positioned](#) to help students achieve the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity. In the U.S., 55 million students attend school for 180 days each year, with most of their [physical activity](#) occurring there. School-based P.E. offers the advantages of a safe, supervised place to play; free access to physical activity rather than pay-to-play models; and the convenience of no additional transportation demands on parents and caregivers to get kids to other venues.

However, cuts to recess and P.E. programs as well as lack of engaging activities, equipment shortages, and insufficient funding contribute to the physical inactivity crisis. And many American students have few or no options when it comes to the before-, during-, and after-school activity so crucial to their wellness and learning potential — depriving them of critical benefits:

- Students who are physically active report eating healthy more often and tend to have better grades, school attendance, cognitive performance, and classroom behaviors; and

- Regular physical activity can help children and adolescents improve cardiorespiratory fitness, build strong bones and muscles, control weight, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and reduce the risk of developing health conditions such as heart disease, cancer, Type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and obesity.



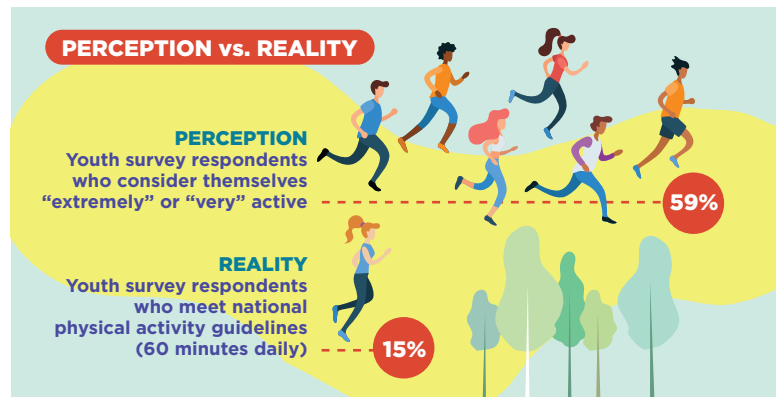
### GENYOUTH Insights reveal:

**Disconnect.** Among survey respondents, more than half (59%) consider themselves extremely or very physically active — yet the vast majority (85%) do not meet the recommended guidelines for physical activity of 7 days a week for 60 minutes.

- ▶ *Minority youth and youth from lower-income households are more active and more likely to meet goals of being active 7 days a week, while youth from higher-income households perceive themselves to be more active than other groups.*

**Disinterest.** Fewer than 4 in 10 youth say that they are very interested in increasing their level of physical activity.

**Lack of Habit Development.** Fewer than half of students report that they are learning about how to maintain good physical activity habits, or how best to achieve specific fitness goals.



**“The GENYOUTH research is most intriguing around hearing from youth about how they have been turned off from P.E. — and how we can turn them back on.”**

Jayne Greenberg, North America Chair, International Sport and Culture Association

# What's Standing in the Way: Barriers to Physical Activity

## THE OBSTACLES.

Numerous hurdles prevent youth from enjoying physical activity and P.E. classes. Addressing these barriers is crucial to helping students foster a positive attitude toward physical activity and develop lifelong healthy habits. Among the key barriers are:

**Lack of skill or confidence.** Students who lack fundamental movement skills may feel embarrassed, awkward, or frustrated, leading to a lack of enjoyment. Negative experiences or fear of failure can erode confidence, making students hesitant to participate.

**Body consciousness.** Lack of body confidence can lead to feelings of self-consciousness or insecurity, causing youth to withdraw from physical activities to avoid judgment or embarrassment.

**Limited variety and choice.** A lack of variety in P.E. activities can lead to students not feeling engaged with the limited activities offered. Not allowing students to have a voice in activities options can reduce their motivation and enjoyment.

**Physical discomfort.** Poorly fitting uniforms, uncomfortable environments (e.g., extreme temperatures), or inadequate facilities and public changing rooms can make P.E. classes unpleasant.

**Lack of inclusivity.** Students with health conditions or disabilities may find it challenging to participate in traditional P.E. activities without appropriate accommodations. Gender stereotypes and biases can make some students feel excluded or uncomfortable. And girls may feel marginalized in traditionally male-dominated sports.

**Quality of instruction and support.** Teachers can inspire a lifelong love for sport and physical activity if they help students find activities they can succeed in, provide constructive feedback, and support less skilled students.

**Emphasis on competition over fun.** Focusing too much on competitive sports rather than on fun and inclusive participation can deter students.

**Economic issues.** Pay-to-play models, transportation demands on families, and lack of access to proper equipment or opportunities for physical activity outside of school can reduce student participation. *School-based P.E. helps overcome these hurdles.*



## GENYOUTH Insights reveal:

### Physical activity barriers include:

**Schoolwork.** More than a third of students (36%) say schoolwork is a barrier to more physical activity.

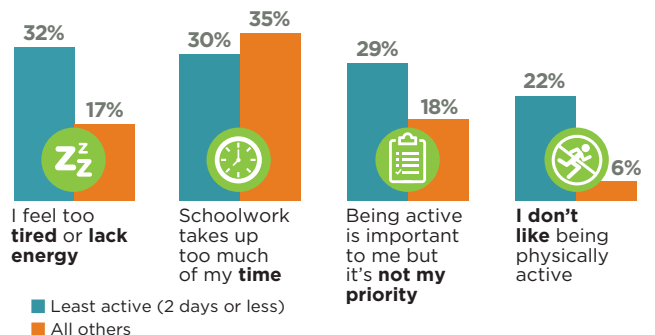
**Competing Priorities.** Other top barriers include the draw of other activities (mentioned by 21% of students) and the fact that physical activity is a low priority (20%).

**P.E. Not Required.** Less than half of youth (49%) say they are required to take P.E. every school year, and P.E. as an elective is available to only about one-third of American youth. And of those who are taking P.E. class in the current semester, 22% are in class two or fewer days per week.

**Fatigue.** Almost a third of youth who are least active say they are too tired to engage in physical activity.

**Body Confidence.** For students in the least active category, body image and confidence is a significant barrier.

### KEY BARRIERS KEEPING THE LEAST ACTIVE YOUTH FROM BEING MORE ACTIVE





## CLOSING KNOWLEDGE GAPS

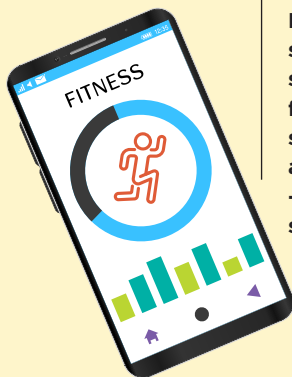
**American youth are generally knowledgeable about physical activity benefits — but they know less about how to be physically active in safe and effective ways.**

GENYOUTH’s research shows that very few youth who are less physically active are knowledgeable about key aspects such as setting goals, ways to get started, and exactly how physical activity can help them achieve goals. Even among the most active youth, less than half are “very knowledgeable” about many important aspects of physical activity.

Youth who are more physically active know how to be active in enjoyable ways. Equipping youth with the knowledge of how and why to be physically active seems to be a powerful predictor of higher levels of activity.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

**Moving the needle on physical activity among U.S. students requires:**



**INVESTING**  
or allocating funding for P.E., active recess, and after-school programs.

**RE-THINKING**  
P.E. class from something students dread to something they look forward to as a time of fun, socializing, collaboration, adventure, and movement — augmenting competitive sports with dance, yoga, martial arts, walking marathons, etc.

**ENSURING**  
that physical activities are inclusive and accessible to children with all abilities.

**CREATING**  
comfortable environments that are free from judgment, protecting privacy, and offering activities that are not sweat-inducing or otherwise increase body self-consciousness.

**LAUNCHING**  
educational/awareness campaigns around physical activity and healthy lifestyles, for teachers and student audiences.

**APPLYING**  
new technologies such as fitness apps, progress trackers, and games that encourage physical activity.

**ENCOURAGING**  
parental involvement as active role models: limiting screen time, incorporating walking and biking to school, and family walks after homework.



# P.E. Class as Hub for Youth Physical Activity

## A BASE FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY.

The fact that P.E. class is the top venue for physical activity among school-aged youth is at least partly because school is where young people spend a great deal of their lives — 180 days annually, in general. Yet youth participation in P.E. is declining as schools have cut programs. And for many students, P.E. is not an enjoyable experience due to limited time in school schedules to take P.E. and classes that do not meet students’ needs and interests — particularly those of girls.

## P.E. CLASSES ON THE DECLINE.

A small percentage of elementary, middle, and high schools offer daily P.E. for the entire school year. A quarter of all schools don’t require students to take any P.E. at all. District P.E. budgets are tight or inadequate. In many communities, outdoor recess opportunities have been reduced or eliminated. Marginalized youth from low-income families and communities of color are disproportionately **impacted** by lack of supportive school-based physical activity/physical education policies and programming.



**GENYOUTH Insights reveal:**

**The #1 Setting.** For youth survey respondents, P.E. class (54%) and casual sports with friends (49%) are their top sources of physical activity.

**Where Kids Learn.** P.E. class is the **number one place at school** where youth learn about physical activity (rated number one by 71% of youth).

**Yet there is room for improvement:**

**Minimal Involvement.** Less than half of youth (49%) are required to take P.E. every year.

- ▶ *P.E. class is offered as an elective for about a third of youth (36%).*
- ▶ *The majority (64%) who are taking P.E. class have it 4 or fewer days per week.*

**A Less-Than-Good Experience.** Fewer than half of students (47%) say participating in P.E. class is a mostly positive experience, and 12% said they actually dread the P.E. participation requirement.

**Dreading It.** What makes some dread versus enjoy P.E. class?

- ▶ *59% of those who dread the P.E. requirement are female.*
- ▶ *More than three-quarters of those who dread P.E. class say they have a lack of choice in activities.*
- ▶ *Those who enjoy P.E. class are much more likely to say their classes include social skills and instruction about healthy eating and physical activity behaviors.*

**“Because adolescents spend so much time at school, even a small increase in the proportion of at-school time spent physically active could lead to meaningful increases in overall physical activity and metabolic health.”**

*Pediatrics*, January 2016



## Motivators: Encouraging, Inspiring, Engaging

### A VARIETY OF FACTORS.

Encouragingly, youth recognize that physical activity improves self-confidence (cited by 91% of students GENYOUth surveyed), appearance (87%), energy (89%), mood and anxiety (86%), and academic performance (77%). Yet motivating and supporting students to participate in physical activity means overcoming a variety of factors at the individual level (such lack of confidence and body consciousness), in their social networks (such as families that don't prioritize physical activity or that model sedentary lifestyles), and at the organizational and broader environmental level (such as school-based physical activity options and resources, policies, presence of qualified instructors, and more).



**GENYOUTH Insights reveal:**

**According to youth survey respondents...**

**Fun Is Fundamental.** Activities that are fun (for 44% of students) and social (for 50% of students) are the top ways to make physical activity more attractive or desirable, including for those who are the least active.

- ▶ 30% of those who are least active dropped out of sports/activities because they weren't fun anymore.

**Meeting Varied Interests and Needs.** Girls want more variety in physical activity options, including non-sport activities.

- ▶ Some girls prefer activities that are non-competitive, not sweat intensive, and don't increase body consciousness.

**Removing Dread.** Students say they want:

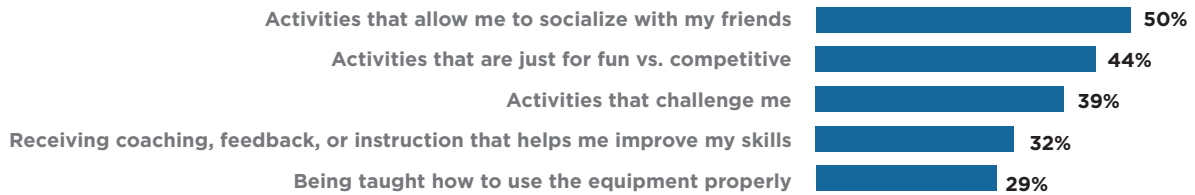
- ▶ To not have to change clothes in front of others (62%).
- ▶ Judgment-free activities (52%).
- ▶ Activities where students are not made to feel self-conscious (52%) or sweaty (47%).

**Teachers Matter.** 42% of students say they want P.E. teachers who will guide them toward activities they can succeed at; who can support less skilled students; and who can inspire in everyone a love for sports and movement, not just the athletically inclined.

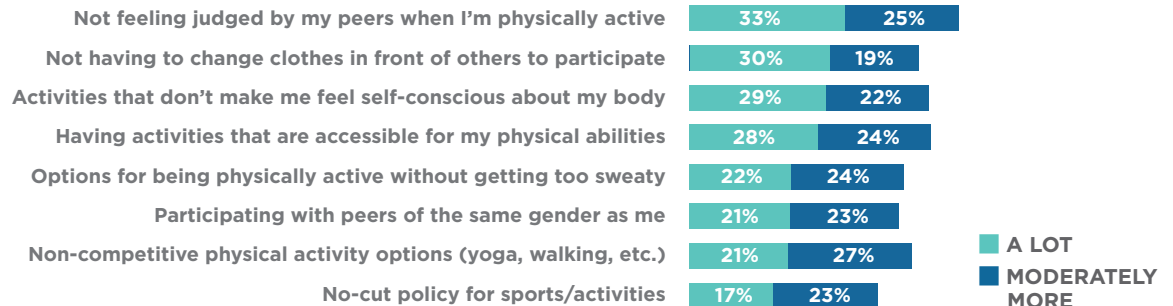
**More Proof.** Having more proof about the benefits of physical activity would motivate youth, especially data about how physical activity enhances self-confidence, physical appearance, energy, and mood (each attribute cited as important by 74% or more of students).

**MAKING P.E. MORE APPEALING**

**What would make physical activity more desirable to you?**



**To what extent would the following make you more comfortable or enthusiastic about engaging in organized physical activity?**



**“We need to think about how schools are currently structured, the facilities. They’re not designed to meet the needs of students now. It’s time to have the conversation.”**

*Kayla Jackson, AASA, The School Superintendents Association*

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION



### VARIETY AND CHOICE.

Offer a wide range of activities that develop fundamental movement skills and build confidence, including traditional sports, individual fitness activities, dance, yoga, martial arts, outdoor adventures, and non-competitive games. Allow students to have a say in the activities they participate in, while meeting P.E. standards.

### FUN AND ENJOYMENT.

Emphasize the fun and social aspects of physical activity. Incorporate games and activities that are enjoyable and engaging.

### INCLUSIVE PRACTICES.

Modify activities to ensure all students can participate, regardless of their physical abilities or skill levels. Meet youth where they are.

### “The changing rooms set the tone for P.E. in school.”

Morgan, 12th grade student, GENYOUth National Youth Council

### SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE ATMOSPHERE.

Create an environment where students feel safe and supported. Address bullying and ensure inclusivity.

### CERTIFIED TEACHERS.

Hire certified P.E. teachers and coaches who are well-trained and enthusiastic about promoting physical literacy for all students.

**“If there’s a takeaway for school leaders wanting to ensure a more equitable physical education program, it would be for them to talk to students and parents about their interests, needs, and concerns... Too often, the ones we’re trying to help the most, we’re ignoring the most. We have to ask, ‘Are we really listening?’”**

From [“Rethink PE,”](#) *American School Board Journal*, October 2022

## GENYOUth Programs Engage Youth — Especially Girls — in Physical Activity and P.E.



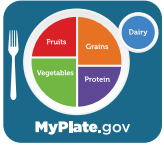
The NFL FLAG-In-School program, offered in partnership with GENYOUth and the NFL Foundation, brings the excitement of flag football

to schools nationwide, promoting physical activity and teamwork among students. Schools receive comprehensive kits with equipment, adaptable lesson plans, and instructional videos aligned with national physical education standards. The program is inclusive, encouraging participation from all skill levels, and helps students develop leadership, communication, and sportsmanship. In addition to physical fitness, NFL FLAG-In-School includes nutrition tips that promote healthy eating habits, emphasizing the connection between good nutrition and athletic performance. The program also fosters community engagement by promoting a culture of healthy competition, and building confidence, camaraderie, and a lifelong love for the game.



GENYOUth’s Root4Her® is a comprehensive program designed to empower middle school girls by integrating physical activity, nutrition, sleep, and social media

education, with curriculum developed in collaboration with SHAPE America. The program promotes lifelong fitness through a variety of fun, engaging activities, encouraging girls to find movement they enjoy. The nutrition component equips girls with essential knowledge about nutrients, balanced eating, healthy snacking, hydration, and mindful eating, while also celebrating cultural and personal food preferences. The curriculum also emphasizes the importance of sleep for overall health and provides strategies to help girls manage their sleep routines effectively. Additionally, Root4Her® addresses the impact of social media on self-esteem and mental well-being, offering guidance on using social platforms positively and responsibly. The program provides multi-use kits with physical activity equipment, nutrition education materials, and adaptable lesson plans suitable for different settings. By prioritizing movement, nutrition, sleep, and mindful social media use, Root4Her® fosters social, emotional, and physical well-being in young girls.



# Nutrition and Physical Activity: Inextricably Linked

## HAND-IN-HAND.

Along with physical activity, proper nutrition — including milk, fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein — is critical for youth health and well-being. Academic performance, muscle health, disease prevention, and mental wellness all rely on physical activity and proper nutrition. Indeed, a balanced diet is what provides the nutrients youth need to support learning and physical activity, just as regular exercise enhances the body’s ability to utilize those nutrients effectively. Together, they are essential components of a healthy lifestyle and contribute to overall well-being.

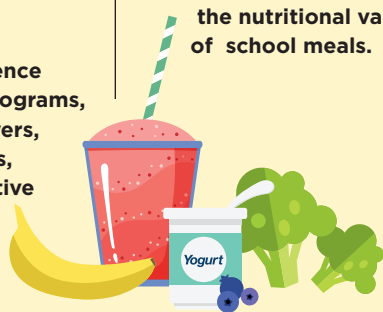
## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

**PROVIDE** schools with the equipment and resources they need to feed students and give them food dignity. Public and private sector partners can help — working collaboratively with school leaders, educators, school nutrition staff, and students to identify needs and design solutions.

**IMPROVE** the mealtime experience with smoothie programs, cafeteria makeovers, grab and go carts, and other innovative solutions.

**SUPPORT** funding solutions like GEYOUth’s **End Student Hunger** initiative.

**MAKE SURE** that foods served and sold at school, including school meals and snacks, are accessible, culturally appealing, nutritious, and encourage eating based on MyPlate. And help students understand the nutritional value of school meals.



**“It’s more than a truism that physical activity and good nutrition are mutually reinforcing. But for school children especially it’s an indisputable fact.”**

Donna Martin, EdS, RDN, SNS, Past President, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics; GENYOUth Board Member

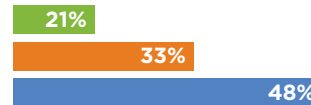


## GENYOUth Insights reveal:

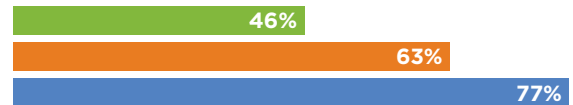
### PHYSICALLY ACTIVE YOUTH ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE BETTER EATING HABITS.

Percentage of youth who say they think about healthy eating and who eat healthy based on self-reported levels of physical activity.

#### THINK ABOUT HOW HEALTHY AND NUTRITIOUS THE FOODS I EAT ARE



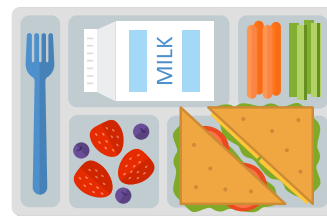
#### EAT A HEALTHY MEAL



- Low activity level (less than 3 times a week)
- Moderate activity level (3-5 times a week)
- High activity level (6-7 times a week)

**More Activity, Better Eating.** Among youth who say they eat healthy all or most of the time, nearly three-quarter (73%) are active 7 days a week. Among the least active youth (active 2 days a week or less), only a third (36%) say they eat healthy on a regular basis.

**Less Activity, Poorer Nutrition.** Youth who are less physically active have poorer eating habits and less energy.



**Less Activity, Skip Meals More.** 39% of youth skip breakfast regularly and another 39% skip breakfast at least a few times a week.

**No Energy.** A third of youth (32%) say their lack of energy is a barrier to being more physically active.



# The Promise of Access, Appeal, and Effectiveness

School is the primary setting where youth are active, yet there is a troubling decline in P.E. participation from elementary to high school. Just as concerning is that fact that fewer than half of students GENYOUth surveyed (47%) say they view physical education positively, and 59% of girls “dread” the requirement. This urgent situation necessitates a better understanding of what youth seek in their school environment.

## OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUTH-INFORMED IMPROVEMENTS.

Students express a desire for more opportunities to take P.E. classes, and they absolutely recognize the benefits that physical activity brings — it impacts fitness, mood, appearance, self-confidence, and academic performance. What students don’t want is the same old P.E. They want activities that are fun, social, inclusive, and that go beyond often pressure-filled competitive team sports. They crave offerings that include instruction on achieving specific goals, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and better nutrition. Young people want engaging P.E. classes that prioritize enjoyment and positivity, and that reduce peer judgment. Students with disabilities are seeking greater opportunities to be active and included. And students want teachers who will guide them toward

activities they can succeed in and who can inspire a love for sports and movement for everyone.

## THE TIME IS NOW FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION.

School-based P.E. programs offer the promise of equitable access to physical activity and safe places to play for all students, regardless of gender, ability, race, or socioeconomic status. As educators, policymakers, students, administrators, parents, and community leaders, we must advocate vigorously for quality physical education and physical activity in all schools. Most fundamentally, this implies the need for:

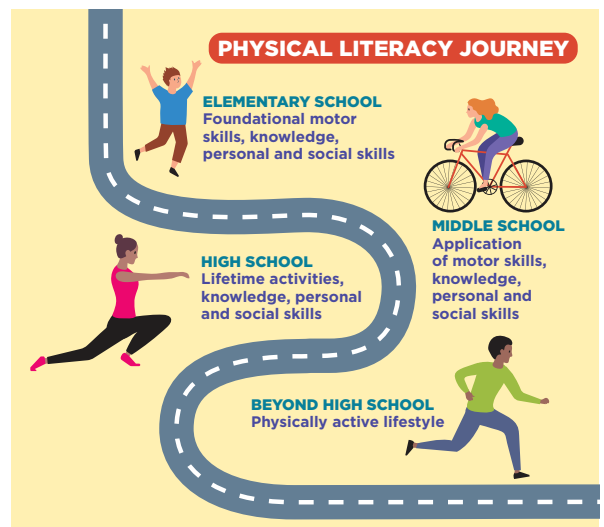
- **Strong and consistent state and federal P.E. policies**
- **More opportunities and diverse course offerings**
- **Adequate funding for equipment and supplies**
- **Certified physical education teachers and coaches at every school**

GENYOUth is pleased to partner with youth, schools, businesses, government, and other public and private sector organizations in our mission to help all schoolchildren thrive. The “opportunities for action” in this brief offer a road map for those who share our mission, and our belief in the unquestioned value of — and the crucial need for — a physically active, well-nourished next generation.

## HABITS FOR A LIFETIME: PHYSICAL LITERACY

In 2024, SHAPE America, the Society of Health and Physical Educators, released the latest [National Physical Education Standards](#), which elevate physical education through a comprehensive approach that encompasses physical literacy, emotional well-being, and the joy of movement. As defined by SHAPE, physical literacy is an individual’s ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life.

The new standards refer to students’ *physical literacy journey*, which acknowledges that physical literacy is not about mastery but is an ongoing process. The best P.E. programs aim toward holistic competence, including opportunities for students to progress along their own meaningful physical literacy journey by developing the skills, knowledge, confidence, appreciation, and motivation to live an active life — across and beyond their preK-12 years.



**SURVEY METHODOLOGY.** The GENYOUth *Youth Insights Survey on Youth Physical Activity and Physical Education* data featured in this report included a representative sample of 1,035 middle, junior, and senior high school students from public, private, and parochial schools, ages 13-18. An advisory committee of health, education, nutrition, and youth engagement experts, students, and practitioners provided guidance on the research topic, hypothesis, and online survey content. All differences reported between segments of the data are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.



This GENYOUth Insights survey was produced with generous funding support from the NFL Foundation.

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## GENYOUth

GENYOUth is a 501c3 national nonprofit dedicated to helping school children thrive by living a well-nourished and physically active life. A catalyst for youth health and wellness, GENYOUth has supported over 77,000 U.S. schools to equip them with the resources needed to ensure millions of children have equitable access to nutrition and physical activity. Founded by America's dairy farmers and the NFL, GENYOUth convenes a network of private and public partners, including Fortune 100 companies and foundations to ensure all children are nourished and active to be their best selves. With a commitment to end student hunger, GENYOUth provides nutrition grants to increase access to healthy school meals among food insecure students. To learn more and support GENYOUth visit [www.GENYOUthnow.org](http://www.GENYOUthnow.org) and follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).