



National Association for Sport and Physical Education

an association of the American Alliance for Health,
Physical Education, Recreation and Dance

NASPE Sets the Standard

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PHYSICAL EDUCATION IS AN ACADEMIC SUBJECT

For more than a century, physical education (PE) has been a fundamental part of the American public school **curriculum**. PE was first offered as a subject in U.S. schools in the early part of the 19th century. State education agency mandates for PE became common after World War I, when many young men were found to be unfit for military service.

What is an academic subject?

The US Department of Education does not appear to define what constitutes an “academic subject.” However, states, school districts, and schools provide a *de facto* definition by the various requirements they establish for content areas, such as math, language arts, science, and history. The following characteristics are typically in place for all academic subjects:

- 1) **Required subject:** Schools are required to teach the subject and students are required to take courses in the subject.
- 2) **Standards:** Academic content standards that include expectations for what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade or grade groupings are approved by the state board of education.
- 3) **Course of study:** A course of study, curriculum framework, instructional guide, or curriculum is approved by the state board of education.
- 4) **Textbooks/instructional resources:** Specific textbooks or instructional resources in the content area are approved or recommended by the state department of education.
- 5) **Student assessment:** Rigorous systems exist that enable teachers to assess student performance in mastering the material taught in subject courses.
- 6) **Grades:** Students receive grades that document the extent to which they have mastered the material taught in subject courses.
- 7) **Teacher preparation program accreditation:** The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) reviews how institutions of higher education prepare future teachers of the subject as part of its performance-based accreditation system.
- 8) **Teacher certification:** State law requires teachers of the content area to meet specific certification, education, and licensing requirements.

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Why is PE an academic subject?

PE is an academic subject because states, school districts, and schools have all of the requirements listed above for PE, just as they do for other subjects, such as math, language arts, science, and history.

1) Required subject

- According to the 2010 *Shape of the Nation* report, 42 states mandate that students must take PE in elementary school, 39 states mandate it for middle school, and 45 states mandate it for high school. 40 states require high school students to take PE in order to graduate.
- A large majority of schools require students to take PE as a requirement for graduation or promotion to the next grade or school level. According to the 2006 *School Health Policies and Programs Study*, 69.3% of elementary schools, 83.9% of middle schools, and 95.2% of high schools had this requirement.

2) Standards

- The *National Standards for Physical Education* (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 1995, 2004) identifies the knowledge and skills essential to the discipline of physical education and thus defines what a physically educated person should know and be able to do. Most state standards are based on the national standards.
- 48 states have adopted standards for PE that identify what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade or grade grouping as a result of participation in PE. That number will soon be 49: in May 2010, the governor of Minnesota signed legislation that directed the Minnesota Department of Education to develop standards for PE.
- Most state departments of education have a website that lists the state's standards for academic subjects such as math, language arts, science, history, and PE. For example, under the heading "Colorado K-12 Academic Standards," the Colorado Department of Education provides links to model content standards for: Civics, Dance, Economics, Foreign Language, Geography, History, Mathematics, Music, Physical Education, Reading and Writing, Science, Theater, and Visual Arts (http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeassess/documents/OSA/k12_standards.html)
- According to the 2006 *School Health Policies and Programs Study*, 81.4% of the nation's school districts had adopted a policy stating that schools will follow national, state, or district standards or guidelines for PE.

3) Course of study

Many states have an approved course of study, curriculum framework, instructional guide, or curriculum for PE that has been approved by the state board of education. Some examples include:

- California Physical Education Framework for California Public Schools, K-12
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/pe/cf/>
- Arkansas Physical Education Curriculum Framework Grades 9-12
http://arkansased.org/teachers/pdf/physed_9-12_06.pdf
- Tennessee K-12 Physical Education Curriculum Approved by the State Board of Education
http://state.tn.us/education/ci/health_pe/index.shtml

- Connecticut Physical Education, A K-12 Guide to Program Development
<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2618&q=320982>
- Alabama Physical Education Course of Study (and Conceptual Framework)
https://docs.alsde.edu/documents/54/PE1_INT.pdf

4) **Textbooks/instructional resources**

A number of states have included approved or recommended lists of textbooks, and these typically include materials for PE courses. For example:

- The Oregon Department of Education’s website lists textbooks recommended by the State Board of Education in the following content areas: The Arts, English as a Second Language, English/Language Arts, Health Education, Physical Education, French, German, Spanish, Mathematics, Science, and Social Science (<http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=1565>).

5) **Student assessment**

Like teachers of other academic subjects, PE teachers have access to state-of-the-art resources and tools to help them assess student performance in their courses. For example:

- NASPE’s PE Metrics includes tools to assess student knowledge, skills, and behaviors; determine the impact of PE programs on students’ achievement of the national standards; and track progress in student achievement of the standards over time.
- South Carolina mandates the use of materials developed by the state’s Department of Education for teachers to assess student proficiency in PE. State law calls for data on the percentage of students proficient in PE at each school to be included in “report cards” for schools issued by the state Department of Education.

6) **Grades**

- According to the 2006 *School Health Policies and Programs Study*, 98.1% of the schools that required students to take PE gave them a grade for the class; more than three out of four of these schools gave letter or numerical grades.

7) **Teacher preparation program accreditation**

- NCATE reviews physical education teacher education programs in institutions of higher education as part of its system of accreditation for teacher preparation programs.

8) **Teacher certification**

- According to the 2010 *Shape of the Nation* report, 39 states require all who teach PE in elementary schools to be certified or licensed, 42 states require this for all who teach PE in middle schools, and 46 states requires this for all who teach PE in high schools. In addition, 41 states require participation in ongoing professional development to maintain certification/licensure as a PE teacher.

Why should PE be included in Title IV of ESEA as part of a well-rounded education?

The original No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001 identified the following subject areas as “core academic subjects”: English, reading or language arts, math, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography. The exclusion of PE sent a strong message to state and local school boards and educational policy makers that the federal government viewed PE as a marginal subject. Many observers believe that the failure to include PE as a core academic subject encouraged a narrowing of the school curriculum and gave many school boards the incentive (and political cover) to reduce or eliminate requirements for students to participate in PE classes. The limited time spent by students in PE over the past decade has complicated efforts to address the childhood obesity epidemic and other serious health problems faced by young people.

The Department of Education’s proposed language for ESEA reauthorization addresses core academic subjects in Title IV, which is entitled “Academic Excellence in Core Academic Subjects.” Part A authorizes grants to support literacy and language arts efforts, Part B authorizes grants to support the teaching of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and Part C authorizes grants to support “Effective Teaching and Learning for a Well-Rounded Education.” Grants in Part C are to be used to support efforts to address “additional academic subjects,” which are defined as “the arts, foreign languages, civics and government, history, geography, environmental education, economics, and financial literacy, and such other subjects as may be identified by the Secretary.” Once again, PE has not been identified as an important subject. This puts the federal government again in the position of sending a strong signal that lowers the value of PE in the eyes of school decision-makers.

At the same time, the Department of Education has proposed eliminating separate funding for the Carol M. White Physical Education Program (~\$78 million this year), the only stream of federal funding uniquely devoted to improving the quality of PE. That funding has been consolidated with some other funding streams in Title V of the draft legislation for ESEA re-authorization to create a new Department of Education initiative entitled “Safe, Successful, and Healthy Students.” The focus of this initiative is to encourage schools to collect data about their “school climate” and compete for funding to improve their school climate scores. The Department of Education includes PE and some other wellness concepts in the definition of school climate, along with violence and substance use prevention and efforts to provide social and emotional support for students. Given the opportunity to address these other issues, it is highly unlikely that schools will choose to focus their school climate efforts on improving PE if it is not identified as an important academic subject. In any case, this section of ESEA addresses PE as an optional learning support area, rather than an essential component of a well-rounded education.

By excluding PE from the list of important academic subjects in Title IV, the Department of Education will once again send a strong message that PE is of marginal importance. In today’s economic climate, few education agencies will have surplus financial and staffing resources to address optional or elective subjects. Failure to include PE among the academic subjects that are part of a well-rounded education will completely undermine the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity’s recommendation to increase “the quality and frequency of sequential, age- and developmentally appropriate physical education for all students, taught by certified physical education teachers.”