

Physical education in EU schools

SUMMARY

The low levels of physical activity among children and adolescents in the European Union are alarming and have become a matter of great concern for policymakers, since physical inactivity is responsible for over 500 000 deaths per year and accounts for economic costs over €80 billion per year.

The educational environment plays a particularly important role: physical education is part of all central curriculum frameworks in the EU, and is compulsory in primary and secondary education. On average, just under 70 hours per year are dedicated to the subject. However, the time allocated to physical education is around only one third of that dedicated to the language of instruction and around half of that for mathematics. Generalists or specialists teach physical education at primary level, with specialists being the norm at secondary level. Specialist teachers at primary level usually have a bachelor's degree whereas, at secondary, half of EU countries require a master's degree. Research shows that funding for physical education in schools is inadequate, which, in turn, is reflected in the often poor quality and lack of equipment at primary and secondary levels in respectively 26 % and 38 % of EU countries.

In May 2014, the Council adopted a new three-year EU work plan for sport. For the first time, financial support for sport is now included in the form of a specific chapter in Erasmus+ – the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport for the 2014-2020 period. The allocation amounts to around €265 million over the entire period. In 2015, the European Commission launched the European week of sport, aiming to raise awareness about the role and benefits of sport and physical activity.

At global level, education through sport is being encouraged by the International School Sport Federation (ISF) via the organisation of international competitions, such as the ISF World Schools Championship, the Gymnasiade, the Pan-American School Games, Euro Schools Football, and the Asian School Games.



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Background

The World Health Organization (WHO) [identifies](#) physical inactivity as the fourth risk factor for global mortality, [provoking](#) 6 % of cases of coronary heart disease, 7 % of type 2 diabetes, 10 % of breast cancer, 10 % of colon cancer, and thus causing an [estimated](#) 3.2 million deaths globally.

Worryingly, recent data (2015) [indicate](#) that a quarter of European adults and four fifths of European adolescents are insufficiently active. The results of the 2014 Eurobarometer [survey](#) on sport and physical activity confirmed that the persistent high rates of physical inactivity in the European Union (EU) are increasing compared to a previous survey from 2009. A 2015 [study](#) on the economic cost of physical inactivity shows that this inactivity is, in turn, responsible for over 500 000 deaths per year across Europe and accounts for economic costs amounting to €80.4 billion per year to the EU-28. This represents 6.2 % of all European health spending; €5 billion more than annual global spending on cancer drugs; or half annual GDP of Ireland or Portugal. Conservative estimates put the annual cost in 2030 at over €125 billion (in 2012 prices).

At the same time, there is an increasing body of evidence [showing](#) that time taken away from academic lessons in favour of physical activity does not come at the expense of school performance. On the contrary, research broadly [supports](#) claims of positive educational benefits from physical activity for young people. In spite of this, physical education is often given limited curriculum time, inadequate financial and human resources, and it has [low subject status and esteem](#).

The EU long lacked a legal basis for any involvement in the area of physical education and sports at school, as it remained exclusively within Member States' remit. [Article 165](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union changed the status quo, as it provided the EU with a new supporting competence, notably in developing the European dimension in sport, and in recognising its social and educational function.

Organisation of physical education in EU schools: methodological aspects

Formal requirements

In most EU countries, national governments have at least some [responsibility](#) for the curriculum. Where decentralised forms of government exist, responsibility is shared but usually lies essentially at regional level as in Belgium, Germany and Spain, for example. Research by Eurydice (2013) [shows](#) that half of EU countries adopt national strategies for the promotion and development of physical education and physical activity at school.¹ Some strategies are designed specifically for physical education, such as in Bulgaria, Spain and Croatia. Others target physical education within a general strategy covering broader sections of the population, as in Latvia and Slovenia. Still others focus more directly on young people, as in the United Kingdom (England).

In some EU countries, centrally coordinated large-scale initiatives replace or complement national strategies. The former is typical for Germany, Italy, and Finland, whereas the latter can be found in Spain, Portugal, Poland and Romania. In general, schools are

Physical activity guidelines

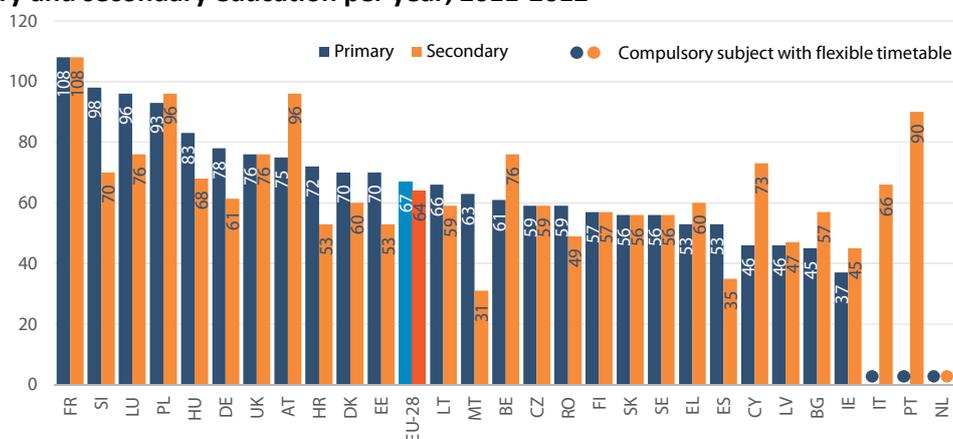
In 2002 the WHO [recommended](#) a minimum of 150 minutes of physical activity per week for adults and 60 minutes per day for children. Following up on its [white paper on sport](#), in 2008 the European Commission developed the [EU physical activity guidelines](#) proposing concrete policy-related actions based on the WHO recommendations. In a further effort to expand the monitoring and surveillance of physical activity in EU countries, in 2015, the Commission provided an overview through [country factsheets](#), the results of which show wide differences among Member States.

granted funds in the framework of such initiatives and their implementation is supported by specifically designated coordinators.

Recommended taught time

Given the number of hours children spend in school and the fact that [up to 80 %](#) of them only practice sport in school, schools become instrumental in promoting physical activity. In the EU, physical education is a mandatory subject throughout full-time compulsory general education. Nevertheless, the prescribed taught time differs significantly from one country to another. In primary education in 2011-2012, the average taught time per school year varied between 37 hours in Ireland and 108 in France. At secondary level, the figures range from 31 hours in Malta to 108 hours in France (see Figure 1). These results show that without practicing an intense physical activity outside school, children in the EU are far from reaching the WHO recommendations on physical activity.

Figure 1 – Recommended minimum number of hours of compulsory physical education in primary and secondary education per year, 2011-2012



Data source: Eurydice, [Physical Education and Sport at School in Europe](#), 2013.

Confirmation of the perceived lesser importance of physical education compared to other subjects is found in looking at the share of total taught time allocated to physical education and that for other subjects. The difference is particularly striking in primary education where the time allocated to physical education is around only one third of that dedicated to the language of instruction and around half of that for mathematics. In most EU countries, the amount of time assigned to physical education is slightly higher than that for natural sciences or for foreign languages, and similar to the amount of time earmarked for artistic activities. In secondary education, the trends remain the same with respect to the language of instruction, mathematics and the arts. However, the time dedicated to physical education is less than to natural sciences and foreign languages.

Physical education around the world

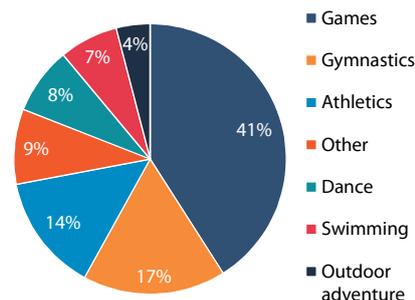
A Unesco report from 2013 [indicates](#) that globally, during primary schooling, children benefit on average from 103 minutes of physical education weekly and roughly the same time in secondary school – 100 minutes weekly. The situation in Europe as a whole slightly exceeds this average. The weekly allocation is respectively 109 minutes in primary – thus topping the global average – and 105 in secondary, where Europe closely follows North America, with 125. However, practitioners [observe](#) a worrying trend of decreasing time allocation since 2000, when figures were higher (respectively 121 minutes in primary schools and 117 in secondary schools) and this, despite international advocacy in favour of physical activity supported by the scientific community. Globally, equality of opportunity for boys and girls is reported in a large majority of countries. Regionally, there are legislative measures in place to foster gender equality. There is also greater consideration of anti-discrimination and disability issues.

Curriculum content

Almost all EU countries identify the physical, personal and social development of young people as the main goals of physical education. However, the nature of physical education is such that top priority is usually given to the development of physical and motor skills. An additional challenge for physical education is to offset the hours spent sitting during other classroom activities and, generally speaking, to discourage a sedentary lifestyle. Physical education is thus closely linked to the promotion of health and a healthy lifestyle.

Among the mandatory physical education activities, games – typically ball games – are the most common, followed by gymnastics, athletics and dance. However, criticism has been [voiced](#) over the perceived bias in orientation of activities towards 'sports-dominated competition- and performance-related activity programmes.' As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of time devoted to games, athletics and gymnastics, amounts to over 70 % of physical education curriculum content at primary level. At secondary level, the situation remains the same, the only difference being that athletics comes second with 17 %, followed by gymnastics with 13 %.

Figure 2 – Physical education activities in primary school, percentage



Data source: K. Hardman, [Current Situation and Prospects for Physical Education in the European Union](#), 2007.

The role of quality physical education in enhancing healthy lifestyles

As children reach adolescence, they typically reduce their physical activity, and many drop out of sport when they lose interest, when the quality of education is poor, or when other school activities become a priority. Similarly, practitioners [warn](#) against the practice of early specialisation in a sport and recommend instead that children participate in a variety of activities to develop a wider range of skills and a lifelong commitment to physical activity. For this to happen, they also need some positive role models such as teachers, parents, and even Olympic athletes. Last but not least, more and more experts [argue](#) that physical education classes should be revamped so there is less emphasis on team sports and more on lifelong fitness activities.

Resources

Funding issues

Funding for physical education in schools is channelled through several sources including national government, regional/local government and other mainly private/commercial sectors. The complex process of devolving national education budgets to regional and local authorities makes it difficult to provide specific figures. However, research aggregating survey-generated data [suggests](#) that over half of European countries registered reductions in financial support in recent years, mainly due to the necessary diversion of financial resources to other subjects and school purposes deemed worthier.

Facilities and equipment

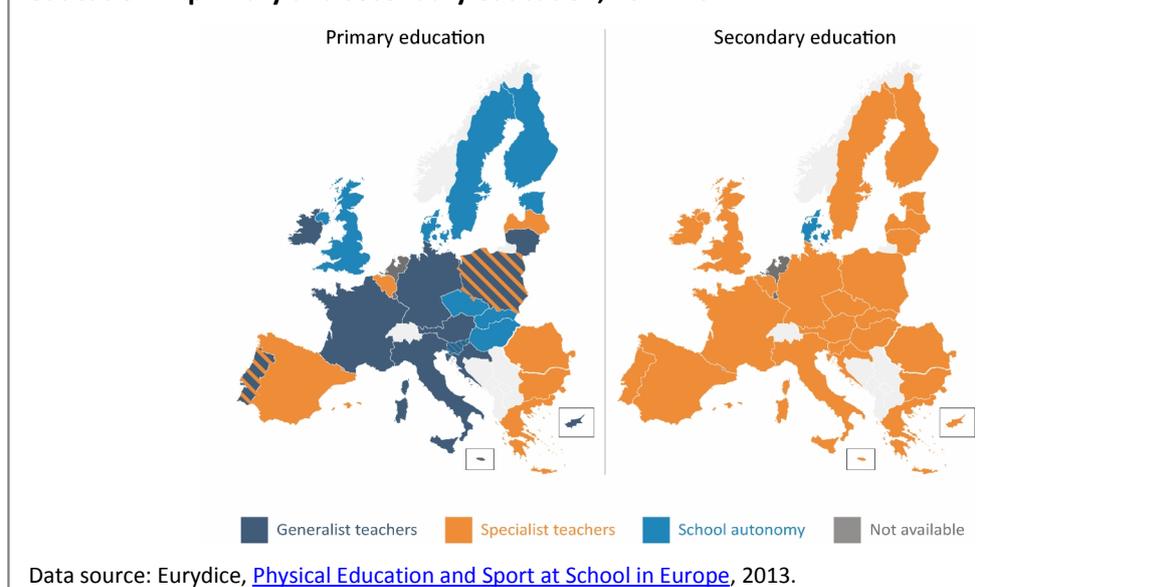
The quality and quantity of provision of facilities and equipment matter not least because inadequate levels of provision can have a negative impact on the quality of physical education. Europe-wide research shows that over a quarter of countries (26 %) [indicate](#) below average or inadequate quality of equipment and facilities. Similarly, more than a quarter of countries (26 %) have limited or insufficient quantity of facilities and over a third of countries (38 %) have limited or insufficient quantity of equipment. Even though experts [claim](#) that the differentiation in quality and quantity of facilities and equipment

is geographically tinted – in other words it is more heavily marked in eastern and central Europe than in western Europe – they still acknowledge that 67 % of EU countries are faced with low levels of maintenance of existing physical education sites. Reportedly, swimming facilities suffer the heaviest impact, given the substantial financial investment necessary for maintaining or gaining access to them, which, in turn, leads to cancellation of lessons or even omission from curricula in many countries. Wider sharing of community resources could, in part, provide a solution to inadequacies in physical equipment.

Staff qualifications

Teachers' professional qualifications matter, since they are instrumental not only in increasing young people's motivation for physical activities, but also in promoting a healthy life style. At primary level, physical education is taught either by generalist teachers, by specialist teachers or by both, depending on the school's autonomy and resources. Generalist teachers may be assisted by a sports coach or advisor. However, this practice raises concerns about quality of teaching. It has been [argued](#) that often such teachers do not have the necessary skills and therefore jeopardise the learning outcomes. At secondary level, physical education teachers are usually specialists (see Figure 3). In most EU countries in which specialists teach physical education at primary level, the minimum qualification required is a bachelor's degree. In half of the EU countries, specialist teachers of physical education in secondary education have a master's degree.

Figure 3 – Recommendations regarding the specialisation required to teach physical education in primary and secondary education, 2011-2012



EU support and involvement

The 2013 [Council Recommendation](#) on promoting health-enhancing physical activity encouraged EU countries to develop integrated strategies involving sport, education, health, transport, environment, and urban planning. In May 2014, the Council adopted a three-year [EU work plan for sport \(2014-2017\)](#). Building on this, the European Commission set up an expert group on health-enhancing physical activity, which drew [recommendations](#) to encourage physical education in schools. Along with more general indications on the role of physical education towards fostering values such as fair play, cooperation, equity, equality, integrity, and developing relevant skills such as teamwork, social inclusion and leadership, the report focuses specifically on physical education taught time, and recommends that during compulsory education this should be increased to at least five hours per week. With respect to the often inadequate quality and quantity

of facilities and equipment, the report suggests the creation of partnerships between schools and sports-sector organisations to ensure the efficient management of infrastructure and prevent duplicate or underused facilities.

With the support of the European Parliament, [funding for sport](#) is now available for the first time in the form of a specific chapter in Erasmus+, the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport for the 2014-2020 period. The allocation amounts to around €265 million over the seven-year period.

The European Week of Sport

The idea for a European Week of Sport originated in the 2011 European Parliament [resolution](#) on the European dimension in sport which recommended the setting up of an annual large-scale event to raise awareness about the role and benefits of sport and physical activity. It is an EU-wide initiative, led by the European Commission and implemented at EU, national, regional and local levels, with the help of national coordinators and in partnership with sports organisations and stakeholders. The first edition of the [European Week of Sport](#) took place in 2015 and received a positive appraisal in the [evaluation report](#). Around 6 million Europeans took part in over 7 000 events in the 31 participating countries across Europe. A spin-off of the European Week of Sport – the [European School Sport Day](#)[®] – engaged more than a million school children from at least 17 countries in inclusive physical activity initiatives on 30 September 2016.

Global initiatives

The international governing body for school sport – [the International School Sport Federation](#) (ISF) – was founded in 1972 with 21 signatory nations from Europe and currently it numbers [88 member countries](#) from five continents. There are 18 recognised ISF sports, each of which has its own championship – the [ISF World Schools Championship](#) – once every two years and attracts 10 000 participants per year. The foremost competition held by the ISF is the Gymnasiade – a biennial multi-sport event featuring 12 sports and attracting 4 000 participants. Other major events include the [Pan-American School Games](#), [Euro Schools Football](#), and [Southeast Asian School Games](#).

Main references

Eurydice, [Physical Education and Sport at School in Europe](#), EACEA, European Commission, 2013.

Hardman, K., 'The situation of physical education in schools: a European perspective', *Human movement*, 2008, vol. 9(1), pp. 5-18.

Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, statistical data in this section is based on: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, [Physical Education and Sport at School in Europe](#), Publications Office of the European Union, 2013.

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