

The School Health Index:

Selected Findings about Student Physical Activity and Physical Education

Soula Servello, Program Manager

This brief summarizes selected findings related to physical activity and physical education from a series of three reports published by the Office of Research & Evaluation (ORE) in December 2018.¹ The three reports focused on School Health Index (SHI) results, common challenges to promoting health and wellness in School District of Philadelphia (SDP) schools, and how well schools report that their efforts align to the SDP Wellness Policy.

In this brief, we use responses to seven SHI questions to examine how 69 schools reported their alignment with the SDP Wellness Policy guidelines related to physical education and activity.

About the SDP Wellness Policy

The National School Lunch Program mandates that districts develop and maintain a District Wellness Policy that supports students and staff to become fit, healthy, and ready to learn. The SDP [Wellness Policy](#) was first passed in 2006, and it was updated in September 2017 to reflect new standards established by the USDA. The Policy includes five key guidelines on Physical Activity and Physical Education:

1. Time will be devoted, in the elementary schedule, for supervised and safe recess.
2. Physical activity shall not be used as a form of punishment or consequence.
3. Elementary students will be given “Movement Breaks” every 90 minutes of seat time.
4. Physical Education will be recognized as an integral part of the core curriculum, K-12.
5. The Physical Education program will devote at least 50% of class time to moderate to vigorous physical activity.

Why is this important to SDP?

Adequate physical activity has been linked to improved academic performance. Research shows that students who are physically active have better grades, school attendance, cognitive performance, and classroom behaviors.² The CDC recommends that students are physically active for at least 60 minutes per day. According to responses to SDP’s District-wide Survey³ in 2017-18,

¹ A summary with links to the full reports is available [here](#).

² National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Population Health. “Health and Academic Achievement.” (2014). https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/health-academicachievement.pdf

³ ORE administers a District-wide Survey (DWS) each spring to students, parents, teachers, and principals. DWS results can be found [here](#).

About the School Health Index

The School Health Index (SHI) is a self-assessment and planning tool developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to help schools meet CDC recommendations for various health and wellness-related topics.

As of April 2019, 69 schools completed a modified version of the SHI available for free on the website of a national non-profit organization, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. This web-based version provides reports and visuals for schools.

Of the 55 questions in the modified SHI, 40 directly correspond to SDP Wellness Policy guidelines. Selected responses from the SHI are summarized here.

The SHI is not meant to be a school-level evaluative tool. However, the results from the sample of schools can help us draw conclusions about what all SDP schools might be facing when they implement health and wellness initiatives. When trying to assess school health policies and programs, the SHI offers the best available data for many indicators and can help us see patterns in our sample and across SDP.

25% of students were meeting that requirement. Schools have the ability to provide opportunities for students to be physically active every day through recess, classroom movement breaks, and physical education classes.

An analysis of SHI results conducted in 2017-18 identified physical activity as one of six key challenges that schools face in improving health and wellness of their students.⁴ Part of this challenge included barriers to offering physical education, encouraging physical activity during recess, and offering movement breaks to students throughout the day.

What do SHI responses tell us about school alignment with District Wellness Policy guidelines?

In this section, we use self-reported school responses to six key questions on the SHI to provide information about the extent to which school efforts are aligned with the five Wellness Policy guidelines. Each guideline is listed, followed by our findings from school-reported information on the SHI.

Guideline 1: Time will be devoted, in the elementary schedule, for supervised and safe recess.

SHI Finding 1: Most schools in our sample that serve K-5 students reported 20 minutes of daily recess.

Of the 51 schools in our sample that serve K-5 students, 84% reported that they were fully or partially meeting CDC's recommendation and that students receive recess for 20 minutes every day. However, 14% of schools reported that students receive less than 20 minutes of recess per day, or that it is provided on some days but not all days. One school reported that they do not offer recess at all (Figure 1).

⁴ Full report on six key challenges [here](#).

Guideline 2: Physical activity shall not be used as a form of punishment or consequence.

*SHI Finding 2: Over half of the schools in our sample that serve K-5 students report that they **do not** prohibit withholding recess as punishment.*

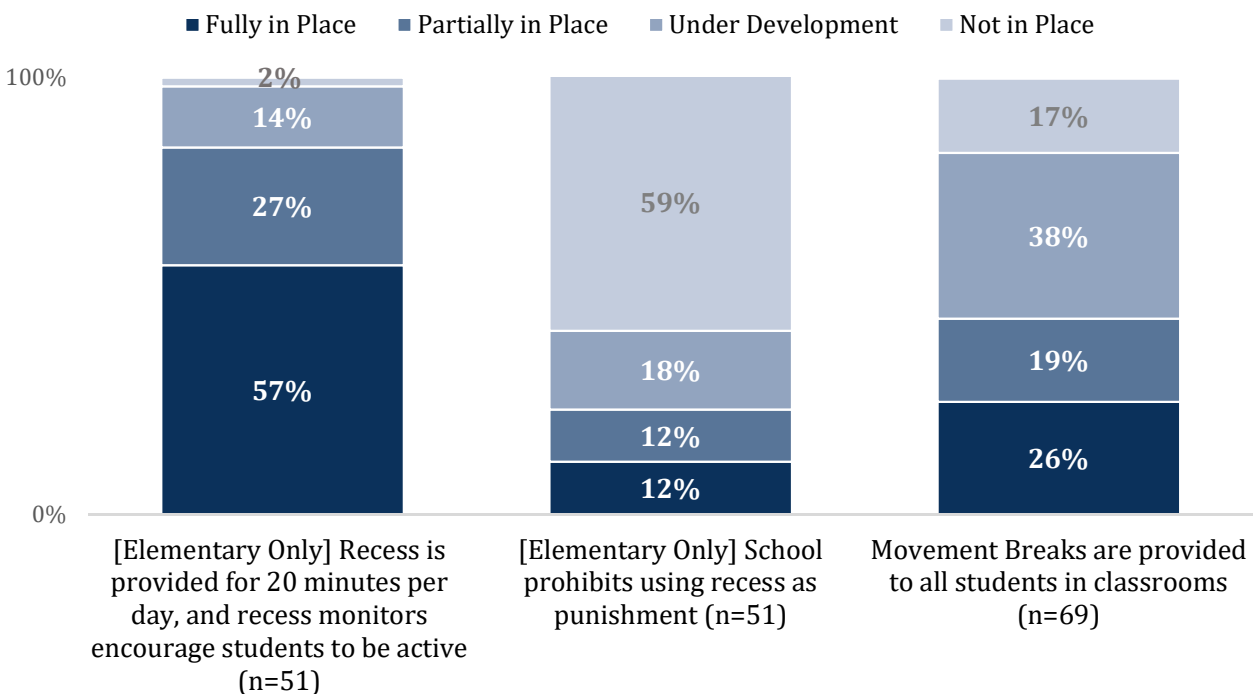
Of the 51 K-5 schools in our sample, 27 (59%) reported that withholding recess is **not** prohibited. An additional 18% reported that the practice is discouraged, but that the prohibition is not consistently followed (Figure 1). This means that teachers and staff can take away recess as punishment for behavioral or academic reasons.

Guideline 3: Elementary students will be given “movement breaks” every 90 minutes of seat time.

SHI Finding 3: About a quarter of all schools in our sample offered students movement breaks on all days during a typical school week.

Use of movement breaks in classrooms is mixed, with 18 schools (26%) reporting that they offered students movement breaks on all or most days during a typical school week (Figure 1). While the Wellness Policy only requires movement breaks for elementary students, five out of 18 schools (28%) that only serve middle and high school students reported that they offer movement breaks every day.

Figure 1. School Health Index Responses to Questions about Recess and Movement Breaks



Guideline 4: PE will be recognized as an integral part of the core curriculum, K-12.

*SHI Finding 4 (Elementary): Almost half of the schools in our sample serving grades K-5 report that students are provided **fewer than** 60 minutes per week of PE.*

The CDC recommends that K-5 students receive 150 minutes of PE per week. Seven schools in our sample serving grades K-5 (14%) reported meeting that recommendation, while almost half (47%) reported that students receive fewer than 60 minutes per week or that not all students receive PE throughout the school year (Figure 2).

SHI Finding 4 (Middle/High): Over half of schools that serve middle and high school students report meeting CDC's recommendation for PE.

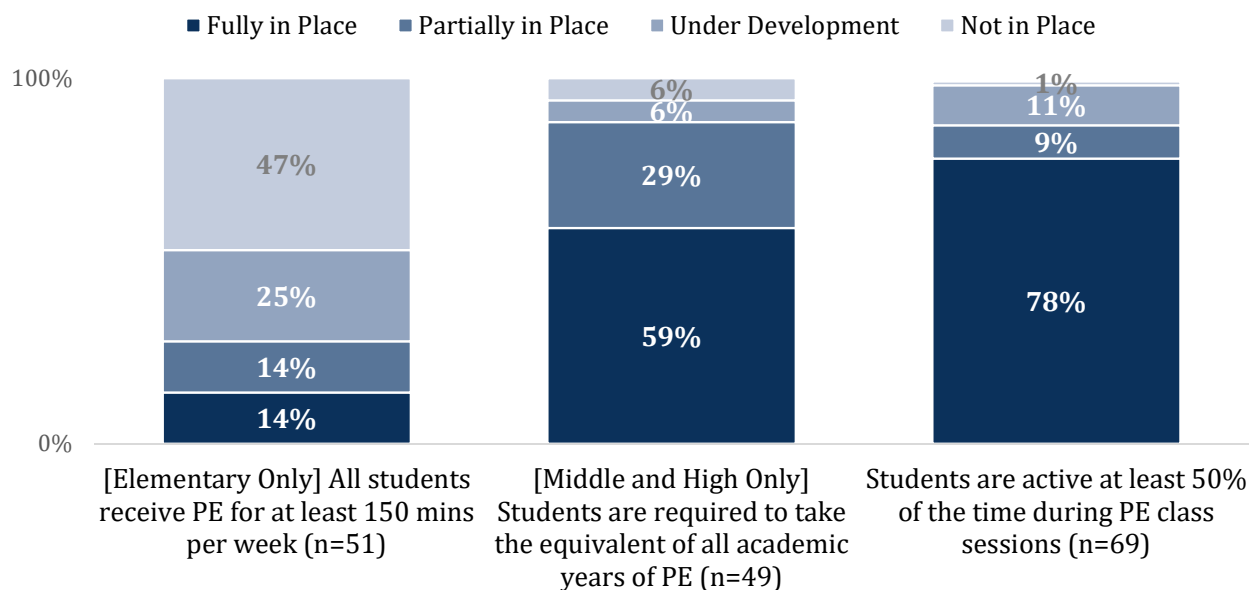
The CDC recommends that middle and high school students should be required to take the equivalent of all academic years of PE. Over half (59%) of the schools that serve middle and high grades (n=49) reported that students take the equivalent of all academic years of PE (Figure 2). Fourteen schools that serve middle and high grades (29%) reported that students are required to take the equivalent of at least one academic year but less than all academic years of PE.

Guideline 5: The PE program will devote at least 50% of class time to moderate to vigorous physical activity.

SHI Finding 5: Over three-quarters of schools in our sample report that teachers keep students moderately to vigorously active for at least 50% of the time during most or all PE sessions.

Most schools in our sample reported that students are active for at least 50% of PE class time, which is consistent with Wellness Policy guidelines (Figure 2). Seven schools (9%) reported that students are active for about half of PE class time, while eight schools (10%) reported that students are active for fewer than half of PE class time.

Figure 2. School Health Index Responses to Questions about Physical Education



Conclusion and Recommendations

The SDP Wellness Policy contains five key guidelines related to physical activity and physical education which are reflected in School Health Index questions. Overall, SHI responses show mixed results in the extent to which schools' efforts align to Wellness Policy guidelines. For example, while most schools (78%) that serve K-5 students reported that they provide students with 20 minutes of daily recess as per CDC guidelines, over half of those schools reported that withholding recess as punishment is not prohibited, which means students might be losing recess for behavioral or academic reasons. Similarly, most schools (78%) reported that students are active for at least 50% of the time during most or all PE classes, but 86% of schools that serve K-5 students do not offer students PE classes for 150 minutes per week as recommended by the CDC.

In order to meet Wellness Policy guidelines, schools might need further support from District offices and from programs that promote health and wellness to ensure students are receiving adequate opportunities for physical activity. In addition, the Wellness Policy could better align with CDC recommendations to offer schools specific guidelines in these areas. For example, the Wellness Policy could include guidelines on how many minutes of recess students should receive every day, and how often students are required to participate in PE classes.