



School-Based Physical Activity Improves the Social and Emotional Climate for Learning



Download the [research brief](#) [PDF - 149 KB] on how school physical activity policies and practices can support SEC and SEL.

The social and emotional climate (SEC) includes aspects of students' educational experience that influence their social and emotional development. A positive SEC helps create safe and supportive learning environments that can affect student:

- Engagement in school activities.
- Relationships with other students, staff, family, and community.
- Academic performance.¹

School physical activity policies and practices contribute to the overall SEC and can also help to develop students' social and emotional learning (SEL).² A [Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program \(CSPAP\)](#) can increase physical activity opportunities before, during, and after school. Offering physical activity programs before and after school and making physical activity part of classroom time can increase opportunities for social interaction and enjoyment of learning alongside peers.

Schools are in a unique position, regardless of learning mode, to help students attain the [recommended 60 minutes](#) of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily.³ Schools can support a CSPAP and reinforce SEL core competencies at the same time.

School leaders can improve the overall school environment by strengthening the connection between school-based physical activity, the social and emotional climate, and social and emotional learning.

School leaders can

- Recognize the value of physical education and physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression, and social interaction.⁴
- Support physical activity integration in the classroom to reinforce what is taught in physical education and give students a chance to practice their new knowledge and skills. Offer daily recess for free play and socialization which are important for building connections with other students.⁵
- Encourage teachers and staff to model active lifestyles and strengthen relationships with students by being physically active during the school day with students.
- Promote equitable access to physical activity by communicating to parents, teachers, and staff about free and low-cost activities that can be done at home and resources in the community that don't require extra equipment or facilities to be physically active.
- Partner with local government to create shared-use agreements to allow public access to school facilities, such as gymnasiums, playgrounds, running tracks, and sports fields.
- Implement policies that prohibit using physical activity as punishment (running laps) or withholding opportunities for physical activity as a form of punishment (not allowing students to participate in recess).

Schools can increase opportunities for physical activity, help cultivate a positive SEC, and strengthen SEL.

Examples of actions to support this effort include:

- Assessing physical education and physical activity policies and practices for alignment with SEC principles and SEL core competencies.
- Incorporating SEC and SEL into existing policies (e.g., [Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program](#), [local school wellness policy](#)) and school improvement plans.
- Using physical education content and active classroom and recess practices and that align with SEL core competencies.
- Communicating with parents about the connections between physical activity, SEC, and SEL that include benefits for students' health and academic success.

Resources

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- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) website. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wsccl/index.htm>. Accessed February 22, 2021.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School health guidelines to promote healthy eating and physical activity. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep. 2011;60(RR-5):1–76. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/rr/rr6005.pdf> [PDF – 974 KB]. Accessed April 22, 2021.
- Alliance for a Healthier Generation. Model School Wellness Policy website. <https://api.healthiergeneration.org/resource/2> [PDF – 2.4 MB] [↗](#) . Accessed March 2, 2021.

References

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1. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). What Is SEL? website. <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/> [↗](#) . Accessed October 23, 2020.
2. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). SEL: What Are the Core Competence Areas and Where Are They Promoted? website. <https://casel.org/sel-framework/> [↗](#) . Accessed October 23, 2020.
3. US Department of Health and Human Services. *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd edition*. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services; 2018. https://health.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/Physical_Activity_Guidelines_2nd_edition.pdf [PDF – 14.9 MB] [↗](#) . Accessed April 20, 2021.
4. SHAPE America. Crosswalk for SHAPE America National Standards & Grade-Level Outcomes for K-12 Physical Education and CASEL Social and Emotional Learning Core Competencies website. <https://www.shapeamerica.org/standards/guidelines/sel-crosswalk.aspx> [↗](#) . Accessed February 22, 2021.
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Increasing Physical Education and Physical Activity: A Framework for Schools, 2019*. Atlanta, GA: US Department of Health and Human Services; 2019. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/pdf/2019_04_25_PE-PA-Framework_508tagged.pdf [PDF – 2.4 MB] [↗](#) . Accessed February 22, 2021.

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