What is Eurydice
The Eurydice Network provides information on and analyses of European education systems and policies. It consists of 40 national units based in all 36 countries participating in the EU’s Lifelong Learning programme and is coordinated and managed by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency in Brussels, which drafts its publications and databases.

The full study
'Physical Education and Sport at School in Europe'
can be found in English on the Eurydice website

Printed copies of the report
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Eurydice Highlights

Physical Education and Sport at School in Europe

Physical education at school not only contributes to pupils’ immediate fitness and good health, but also helps young people to perform and understand physical activity better with positive lifelong repercussions. Moreover, physical education at school brings about transferable knowledge and skills, such as teamwork and fair play, cultivates respect, body and social awareness and provides a general understanding of the ‘rules of the game’, which students can readily make use of in other school subjects or life situations.

Because of its numerous benefits, the promotion of physical activity has received increased attention at European level. The 2009 EU Lisbon Treaty has given the European Union a legal basis to call for action to develop the European dimension in sport and to contribute to the promotion of European sporting issues.

In view of these policy developments, and to better understand the situation of physical education in Europe today, a report, entitled Physical Education and Sport at School in Europe, has been produced by the Eurydice network. The report aims at mapping the state of play of physical education and sports activities at school in 30 European countries. The report can be regarded as the first attempt by the European Commission to identify key concerns and strengths regarding physical education at school in Europe. This brochure summarises key findings of the report.
Physical education is included as subject in all national curricula

Physical education is compulsory in all examined national curricula at primary and lower secondary level. For almost all countries, the main aim of physical education lies in fostering children’s physical, personal and social development. Promoting a healthy lifestyle is also often emphasised and health education has become its own mandatory subject in Ireland, Cyprus and Finland. Learning outcomes of physical education are closely related to its main aims. Some countries, such as Germany, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Nordic countries, take a cross-curricular approach to the subject at school. This means that aspects of, for example, social and natural sciences are explored during physical education and vice versa, showing how subjects are interrelated.

Games and gymnastics are the two most commonly taught mandatory activities

Central authorities of many countries include basic motor activities such as walking, running, jumping and throwing in their curricula in the first years of primary education. Gradually, curricula build on these basic skills and enlarge their scope to cover more complex sports disciplines.

The most common mandatory activities are listed in the table below, with some countries providing schools with the autonomy to decide on whether or not the activity is optional or mandatory. Among the mandatory physical education activities in schools, games – typically ball games – are the most common.

Activities specified as mandatory in the central curriculum/steering documents in primary (ISCED 1) and lower secondary education (ISCED 2), 2011/12

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Examples of cross-curricular approaches:

- In the Czech Republic, Germany and Norway, traffic rules for pedestrians and cyclists are part of the physical education curriculum.
- Nordic countries report that pupils learn how to make use of maps and other means of orienting themselves in a natural environment.
- The Czech Republic, Greece and Poland refer to the importance of familiarising young people with the Olympic ideals and symbols.
- In Slovenia, teachers of subjects other than physical education are encouraged to interrupt their classroom lessons occasionally during a so called ‘minute for health’. During this short break, pupils undertake motor activities and relax for a while.

Source: Eurydice.
Taught time of physical education is low compared with that of other subjects

Prescribed taught time of physical education varies significantly from one country to another as well as between education levels. Moreover, some countries fix the minimum hours of physical education at central level, while others leave this decision up to schools. For example, for the 2011/12 school year, the recommended minimum average taught time at primary level varied between 37 hours in Ireland and 108 hours in France. At secondary level, time spent ranged from 24 to 35 hours in Spain, Malta and Turkey to 102 to 108 hours in France and Austria. In general, the share of taught time recommended for physical education is rather low compared to that of other subjects – a fact that reveals that the subject is commonly perceived as less important. This difference is especially striking during primary education. Here, the proportion of taught time devoted to physical education is only around half of that dedicated to mathematics. Overall, there have been no major changes in the taught time for physical education since the 2006/07 school year.

Minimum time allocated to physical education as a compulsory subject, as a proportion of total taught time in primary and full-time compulsory general secondary education, 2011/12

Extra curricular physical activities and sports are widespread in Europe

Extracurricular physical activities offered outside of school time, such as competitions or health-related activities, are designed to make physical activities even more accessible and attractive to young people. Their main purpose is to broaden or complement activities undertaken during school time. Extracurricular physical activities are organised at national, regional, local and very often at school level. While extracurricular activities are available for all pupils, they also target children with disabilities or special educational needs. Some extracurricular activities even take place during the school day. Indeed, in some countries physical education is not limited to physical education classes, but is integrated into the daily school routine. In many Danish schools, for example, students practice ‘morning running’ before school starts. Other countries use extended school breaks to include physical activities on the playground or in the gym.

Physical education is assessed as other subjects

In most countries, pupils’ progress in physical education is assessed like it is in any other subject. Only a few countries do not assess pupil’s physical education skills in a formal way. This is the case in Malta and Norway at primary level and in Ireland at both primary and lower secondary level. Most European countries issue clear recommendations on which assessment methods to use. Only in Belgium and Iceland are educational institutions free to choose their own assessment methods. Most countries issue a final report at the end of each year which contains results of physical education along with those of other subjects. Some countries have developed central assessment scales in order to provide teachers with harmonised tools to assess pupils’ achievement within a country. These scales, in turn, also allow for national level comparisons of learning outcomes.
Physical education teachers are often subject specialists

In most countries, the decision of whether a generalist or a specialist teacher is put in charge of physical education classes depends on the education level. As a general rule, the higher the education level the more likely it is that a specialist teacher will teach the subject. At primary level, physical education is taught by both generalist and specialist teachers while at lower secondary level, physical education teachers tend to be subject specialists.

Regarding qualification requirements, specialist teachers at primary level generally hold a Bachelor’s degree. At secondary level, however, teachers either hold a Bachelor’s degree, or, as is already the case in 15 countries, a Master’s degree. Continuing professional development opportunities are offered to both generalist and specialist teachers throughout their careers.

Recommendations regarding the specialisation required to teach physical education in primary education (ISCED 1) and in lower secondary education (ISCED 2), 2011/12

![Map of Europe showing specialisation required in primary and lower secondary education](image)

Source: Eurydice.

Reforms in physical education under way in many countries

Around one-third of respondent countries are currently planning reforms relevant to physical education. Portugal and Finland, for example, are intending to raise the profile of physical activities directly by increasing the minimum taught time. Greece and Hungary intend to diversify the provision of organised physical activity at school. National reforms in many countries are also seeking to improve the conditions under which the subject is taught and to promote the training of those who teach it.