Physical Education FAQs

Physical Education (PE)

1. What is physical education?

Physical education teaches students how their bodies move and how to perform a variety of physical activities. Students learn the health-related benefits of regular physical activity and the skills to adopt a physically active, healthy lifestyle. The discipline provides learning experiences that meet the developmental needs of students. A standards-based physical education program also provides an excellent opportunity to ensure that students develop positive social skills, learn to cooperate with others, and learn to accept responsibility for their own actions.

2. Why do we teach physical education?

Physical education contributes significantly to every student’s health and well-being. Physical education is an instructional priority for California schools. Every student, regardless of disability, ethnicity, gender, native language, race, religion, or sexual orientation, is entitled to a high-quality physical education program. Physical education is an integral part of the overall education program for every student and provides one of the few opportunities for every student to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary to lead a physically active lifestyle. A high-quality physical education program promotes an active lifestyle, improved health, motor skill development, and better cognitive performance.
Daily physical education for all students is recommended by numerous national associations, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, the National Association for State Boards of Education, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Heart Association, and is noted in the *Healthy People 2020* document.

A student who becomes skilled and knowledgeable in physical education is more likely to become a healthy adult who is motivated to remain healthy and physically active throughout his or her life.

Physical education is a part of the coordinated school health system program. It is the component that addresses the student’s fundamental need for planned, sequential instruction that promotes lifelong physical activity and attitudes and behaviors that reduce health risks.

3. **What is the difference between physical education and physical activity?**

The terms *physical education* and *physical activity* are often used interchangeably, but they differ in important ways. Understanding the difference between the two is critical to understanding why both contribute to the development of healthy and active children. Every child needs both a quality physical education and physical activity program.

*Physical education* instructional programs provide students with the skills and knowledge they need to establish and sustain physical activity as a key component of their lifestyle, as children, adolescents, and adults. The physical education model content standards adopted by the State Board of Education (SBE) involve five overarching
standards at kindergarten through grades eight and three overarching standards at grades nine through twelve and include eight essential content areas that provide a sequential, standards-based set of learning instruction. The curriculum of physical education instruction provides students with essential skills and knowledge through a broadly-based curriculum that is age-appropriate and links learning experiences in a sequential and articulated manner.

**Physical activity** is any bodily movement that is produced by the contraction of skeletal muscle and that substantially increases energy expenditure, including exercise, sport, dance, and other movement forms. Physical education programs, recesses, intramural sports programs, and athletic programs involve physical activity, but each serves a different purpose. Intramural sports and athletic programs provide opportunities for student learning but are not likely to constitute high-quality, standards-based physical education instruction.

The recess period provides students with the opportunity for unstructured time during the school day. These breaks from classroom activities may enhance participation and learning in the classroom aside from the benefits gained from additional physical activity.

Intramural programs provide opportunities for students to be physically active and apply physical education learning outside the curricular program. In addition, intramural programs give students an opportunity to implement the skills and knowledge gained in physical education.

Athletic programs are essentially designed for youths who have special skills and would like to specialize in one or more sports. They provide
students with the opportunity to refine their skills and compete with others of similar interests and abilities.

Physical activity may include recreational, fitness, and sport activities such as jumping rope, playing soccer, lifting weights, or participating in organized sports. National recommendations (such as the National Association of Sport and Physical Education and The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, United States Department of Health and Human Services) urge school-age children to accumulate at least 60 minutes, and up to several hours, of physical activity per day while avoiding prolonged periods of inactivity. Physical activity programs that students participate in outside of school are not the same as physical education instructional programs. Such programs typically provide an opportunity for students to develop skills in a single area and are not intended to provide instruction in the essential content areas and standards of physical education.

Physical Education Courses

**Elementary**

1. What is the course of study for the elementary grades?

The selection of a course of study for grades one through six is the responsibility of local governing boards of education. The course of study selected and implemented for physical education, beginning in grade one and continuing through grade six, must include instruction with an "emphasis upon the physical activities for the pupils that may be conducive to health and vigor of body and mind, for a total period of time of not less than 200 minutes each ten schooldays, exclusive of recesses and the lunch period" (EC Section 51210[g]).
The CDE provides both the *Physical Education Model Content Standards for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* and the *Physical Education Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* that it recommends local governing boards use to guide their choice of courses of study for physical education programs. Both documents are available on the CDE Curriculum and Instruction Web page.

2. **How many minutes of physical education instruction must elementary students in grades one through six receive?**

Students in grades one through six, inclusive, must be provided with physical education instruction with an "emphasis upon the physical activities for the pupils that may be conducive to health and vigor of body and mind, for a total period of time of not less than 200 minutes each ten schooldays, exclusive of recesses and the lunch period" (*EC Section 51210[g]*).

3. **What are the required instructional minutes for an elementary school maintaining any of grades one through eight?**

If a school is identified as an elementary school in the County-District-School (CDS) code system, *EC Section 51223* states that, "Notwithstanding the provisions of Sections 51210 and 51222, instruction in physical education in an elementary school maintaining any of grades one to eight shall be for a total period of time of not less than 200 minutes each ten schooldays, exclusive of recesses and the lunch period."

**Middle Grades and High School**

1. **What is the course of study for grades seven through twelve?**
(EC Section 51220[d]) "The adopted course of study for grades seven to twelve, inclusive, shall offer courses in the following areas of study: (d) Physical education, with emphasis given to physical activities that are conducive to health and to vigor of body and mind, as required by EC Section 51222."

2. How many minutes of physical education instruction must students in grades seven through twelve receive?

Notwithstanding EC Section 51223, “All pupils, except pupils excused or exempted pursuant to EC Section 51241, shall be required to attend upon the courses of physical education for a total period of time of not less than 400 minutes each ten schooldays” (EC Section 51222[a]).

High School

1. What are the state high school graduation physical education course requirements?

The minimum requirement for graduation is two courses in physical education. “Commencing with the 1988-89 school year, no pupil shall receive a diploma of graduation from high school who, while in grades nine to twelve, inclusive, has not completed . . . ” (EC Section 51225.3[a]) “two courses in physical education, unless the pupil has been exempted pursuant to the provisions of this code” (EC Section 51225.3[a][1][F]).

2. What is the required course content for high school students enrolled in physical education?

The course of study adopted by local educational agencies (LEAs) must include physical education for grades one through six (EC Section 51210[g]) and for grades seven through twelve (EC Section 51220[d]). These statutes specify that the physical education course of study must include an
emphasis upon those physical activities that may be “conducive to health and vigor of body and mind.”

EC Section 51220(d) and EC Section 33352(b)(7) together require that an LEA offer a course of study in physical education for grades nine through twelve that includes a developmentally appropriate sequence of instruction in eight areas over the span of the physical education classes offered as part of the school’s course of study. The law does not specify that every class must include instruction in all eight areas, but rather it speaks to a course of study over grades nine through twelve that includes all eight areas.

Along with EC Section 33352(b)(7), the *California Code of Regulations*, Title 5 (5 CCR), Section 10060 outlines the criteria upon which each school district shall evaluate their course of study for high school physical education. The course of study provides for instruction in a developmental sequence in each of the following areas:

1. Effects of physical activity upon dynamic health
2. Mechanics of body movement
3. Aquatics
4. Gymnastics and tumbling
5. Individual and dual sports
6. Rhythms and dance
7. Team sports
8. Combatives

In addition, the *Physical Education Model Content Standards for California Public Schools*, High School Courses One and Two, convey a course model that includes the topics listed above.

3. *Is there a particular requirement of course content in order for a course to be awarded physical education*
credit? (As a part of a broader course of study in physical education.)

In making the determination of whether to award physical education credit for any given activity or class, EC Section 51220(d) and EC Section 33352(b)(7) together require that an LEA offer a course of study in physical education for grades nine through twelve that includes instruction in the eight areas over the span of the physical education courses offered as part of the school’s course of study. The law does not specify that every class must include instruction in all eight areas, but rather it speaks to a course of study over grades nine through twelve that includes all eight areas. It is ultimately the obligation of the LEA to determine how each particular class, as conducted in its district, supports its course of study for grades nine through twelve. The course of study should include the eight areas and substantially meet the objectives and criteria of EC Section 33352(b)(7). While it is not required that every class for which physical education course credit is given includes all eight areas, the LEA is required to structure its course offerings such that all areas are included over the course of study offered to all students.

In addition, it is important to note that EC Section 33352(b) requires the LEA to meet additional responsibilities should the LEA decide to award physical education credit for a particular course. These responsibilities include the provision of minimum instructional minutes, various reporting requirements, and the assignment of an appropriately credentialed teacher.

4. If high school courses provide students with physical activity, but do not meet the content requirements, can those courses be used to meet physical education requirements?
It is ultimately the obligation of the LEA to determine how each particular class, as conducted in its district, supports its course of study for grades nine through twelve. The course of study should include the eight areas and substantially meet the objectives and criteria of EC Section 33352(b)(7). While it is not required that every class for which physical education course credit is given includes all eight areas, the LEA is required to structure its course offerings such that all areas are included over the course of study offered to all students.

5. **May a student be granted physical education course credit for participation in Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps/Cadet Corps?**

It is ultimately the obligation of the LEA to determine how each particular class, as conducted in its district, supports its course of study for grades nine through twelve. Whether Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps/Cadet Corps may be awarded physical education credit is the decision of the local governing board. In making this decision, the local board may consider the district’s course outline of the Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps/Cadet Corps, the physical education model content standards, and the 2009 letter from the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

6. **May a student be granted physical education course credit or an exemption under EC Section 51242 for participation in marching band?**

It is ultimately the obligation of the LEA to determine how each particular class, as conducted in its district, supports its course of study for grades nine through twelve. Whether marching band may be awarded physical education credit is the decision of the local governing board. In making this decision, the local board may consider the district’s course
outline of the marching band, the visual and performing arts content standards and framework, the physical education model content standards and framework, and the 2009 letter from the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

7. Does a school need to write specific policy regarding high school graduation requirements for physical education or should they just put the California Education Code into their local governing board policy?

The governing board of a school district or the County Office of Education (COE) superintendent of schools determines the local governing board policy. LEAs should contact their legal counsel for additional assistance on this issue. The California School Boards Association Web site provides guidance to districts on establishing policies.

8. What are the current physical education assignment codes for the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS)?

The physical education course codes for CALPADS can be found in the CALPADS Code Sets file, which is located on the CALPADS System Documentation Web page. (You will find the CALPADS Code Sets under the “CALPADS File Specifications [CFS]” heading; the document is provided in Microsoft Excel format.)

**Independent Study**

1. What is independent study in physical education?

Independent study is a voluntary alternative instructional strategy for providing regular education. Students work independently, according to a written agreement and under the general supervision of a credentialed teacher. Attendance in independent study is based on the time value of the
student’s work product, as determined by the student’s supervising teacher. Because independent study is an alternative instructional strategy, not an alternative curriculum, students follow the same course of study and meet the same academic standards as classroom-based students. Independent study students must adhere to EC sections 51222, 51225.3, 51241, and 60800, which requires all grade nine students to be tested in the state’s physical performance test (FITNESSGRAM®). Note: Independent study is offered at the option of the district, and not all districts offer this alternative instructional strategy.

Exemptions from Physical Education Instruction

1. **When discussing the requirements surrounding physical education, what is meant by an exemption, and what is meant by a waiver of Education Code?**

   A waiver speaks to the ability of the governing board of an LEA or COE to request, under EC Section 33050, the SBE to excuse the affected district(s), county, and/or school(s) from the requirements of a specific provision of EC or 5 CCR. The purpose of a waiver is to provide flexibility to the petitioning governing board, without undermining the basic intent of the law.

   An exemption for the purpose of physical education refers to a process by which a governing board of an LEA or the superintendent of a COE may excuse a particular pupil from attending courses in physical education if specified criteria are met.

2. **What exemptions are available under California Education Code?**

   A. Under EC Section 51241, there are three distinct and separate exemptions:
i. Temporary:

"The governing board of a school district or the office of the county superintendent of schools of a county may grant a temporary exemption to a pupil from courses in physical education, if the pupil is one of the following:

- Ill or injured and a modified program to meet the needs of the pupil cannot be provided.
- Enrolled for one-half, or less, of the work normally required of full-time pupils" (EC Section 51241[a][1][2]).

ii. Two-year:

“The governing board of a school district or the office of the county superintendent of schools of a county, with the consent of a pupil, may grant a pupil an exemption from courses in physical education for two years any time during grades ten to twelve, inclusive, if the pupil has met satisfactorily at least five of the six standards of the physical performance test administered in grade nine pursuant to Section 60800” (EC Section 51241[b][1]).

iii. Permanent:

“The governing board of a school district or the office of the county superintendent of a county may grant permanent exemption from courses in physical education if the pupil complies with any one of the following:
o Is 16 years of age or older and has been enrolled in the 10th grade for one academic year or longer.

o Is enrolled as a postgraduate pupil.

o Is enrolled in a juvenile home, ranch, camp, or forestry camp school where pupils are scheduled for recreation and exercise pursuant to the requirements of Section 4346 or Title 15 of the California Code of Regulations (EC Section 51241 [c][1][2][3]).

B. EC Section 51242 allows the governing board of a school district to exempt any four-year or senior high school pupil from attending courses of physical education if the pupil is engaged in a regular school-sponsored interscholastic athletic program.

C. Under EC Section 51222(a), any pupil may be excused from physical education classes during one of grades ten through twelve for not to exceed 24 clock hours in order to participate in automobile driver training. Such pupil who is excused from physical education classes to enroll in driver training shall attend upon a minimum of 7,000 minutes of physical education instruction during each school year.

D. Under EC Section 52316, any pupil enrolled in grade ten, eleven, or twelve, and who is also attending a regional occupational center or regional occupational program may be excused from attending courses in physical education by the governing board of the school district maintaining grade ten, eleven, or twelve, and in which the pupil is enrolled, if attendance upon such classes results in hardship because of travel time involved. If a
pupil is excused from physical education classes pursuant to this section, the minimum schoolday for him or her in his or her regular high school is 180 minutes.

E. Under EC Section 51246, the governing board of a school district may exempt any pupil enrolled in his or her last semester or quarter, as the case may be, of the grade twelve who, pursuant to EC Section 46145 or 46146 or 46147, is permitted to attend school less than 240 or 180 minutes per day, from attending courses of physical education; provided, however, that such pupil may not be exempted pursuant to this section from attending courses of physical education if such pupil would, after such exemption, attend school for 240 minutes or more per day.

3. Who can exempt a student from physical education?

The governing board of a school district or the office of the county superintendent of schools of a county, as specified in EC sections 51222(a), 51241, 51242, 52316, and 51246, can exempt a student from physical education.

4. Can a local governing board grant a permanent exemption to an entire class or grade span?

No, the exemption must be granted to each individual student and only if that student meets the provision of EC sections 51222, 51241(a), 51241(c), 51242, or 51246.

5. If a school district requires two years of physical education credits for their high school graduation requirements, has the district essentially invoked the two-year physical education exemption?

No, the governing board of a school district or the office of the
county superintendent of schools of a county may grant exemption to a pupil only if the requirements set forth in EC Section 51241(b) are met, including the consent of the individual pupil. The district is required to offer courses in physical education to those students who do not qualify for an exemption or do not consent to an exemption (EC sections 51222, 51241(a), 51241(c), 51242, and 51246).

6. **Do all exemptions require the consent of the pupil?**

   Exemptions that may be granted without the pupil’s consent include EC sections 51222, 51241(a), 51241(c), 51242, and 51246.

7. **How did the passage of Senate Bill 78, Chapter 459, Statutes of 2003; Senate Bill 601, Chapter 720, Statutes of 2007; and Senate Bill 602, Chapter 32, Statutes of 2008, affect exemptions under California Education Code Section 51241?**

   These three bills affected only the “two-year exemption” (EC Section 51241[b]), not the temporary or permanent exemptions. Students who began grade nine on or after July 1, 2007, are affected by the law.

8. **How does California Education Code Section 51241(b) define passing for the purpose of the two-year exemption?**

   For the purpose of the two-year exemption from high school physical education courses, a student has passed the physical performance test if the student has “met satisfactorily at least five of the six standards.” A student has satisfactorily met the standards of the FITNESSGRAM® if the student performs within the Healthy Fitness Zone in at least five of the six areas.

   Districts must continue to offer students who are exempted under relevant EC a variety of elective physical education courses for no less than 400
minutes every ten schooldays (EC sections 33352[b][6], 51222[b]).

9. **What physical education courses shall be available for high school students who have been exempted from two years of physical education?**

"The governing board of each school district that maintains a high school and that elects to exempt pupils from required attendance in physical education courses pursuant to paragraph (1) or (2) or both of subdivision (b) of EC Section 51241 shall offer those pupils so exempted a variety of elective physical education courses of not less than 400 minutes each ten schooldays" (EC Section 51222[b]).

**Athletic Insurance**

1. **What is Assembly Bill 2684 (Chapter 108, Statutes of 2006)?**

Assembly Bill 2684 amended EC Section 32221.5 requiring LEAs with interscholastic teams to send information to parents via a prescribed statement:

Under state law, school districts are required to ensure that all members of school athletic teams have accidental injury insurance that covers medical and hospital expenses. This insurance requirement can be met by the school district offering insurance or other health benefits that cover medical and hospital expenses.

Some pupils may qualify to enroll in no-cost or low-cost local, state, or federally-sponsored health insurance programs. Information about these programs may be obtained by calling 1-800-880-5305.
The statement described in subdivision (a) shall also be incorporated into letters or printed materials, in boldface type of prominent size, that contain the name or logo, or both, of the school district and are sent to members of school athletic teams to inform them of the provisions of this article, or any other applicable provision of state law, regarding the provision of insurance protection (EC Section 32221.5).

2. California Interscholastic Federation has rules and regulations which list approved regular athletic activities. If a school has athletic teams participating in California Interscholastic Federation sanctioned competitions do we then interpret that they have entered into a voluntary association with California Interscholastic Federation and that California Interscholastic Federation should be the determining factor for what defines a “regular interscholastic athletic activity” for that school district?

School districts that have joined California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) are bound by their rules and regulations, as they apply to the preparation for and participation in athletic competitions between schools. However, while the definition that governs the CIF may be helpful in determining whether an activity is a “regular school-sponsored interscholastic athletic program,” it is not definitive. There are potentially interscholastic athletic events that are not included in CIF’s agreements and are therefore left to individual districts or schools to negotiate the rules of competition. The purpose of EC Section 51242 is to exempt a pupil from courses in physical education because he or she is participating in a substitute physical education program. There is no clear limit on these programs, nor any authority of the CIF to influence curriculum offered in California’s public schools. Therefore, CIF’s definition of "regular school-sponsored interscholastic athletic program"
may not be the sole factor in determining what is a regular interscholastic athletic program for that school or district.

**Dressing and Lockers**

1. **Must a district require students to change clothes for physical education instruction?**

   This is an LEA decision. The LEA needs to establish a physical education dress policy for their district. It is appropriate for students to change their clothes for hygiene, safety, and movement efficiency purposes.

2. **May a student’s grade be affected if the student doesn’t wear standardized physical education apparel?**

   *EC Section 49066* states that a student’s grade cannot be adversely affected if the failure to wear appropriate apparel arises from circumstances beyond the control of the student.

3. **Must a district provide locker room facilities for student use?**

   *EC* does not address requirements for schools to build or utilize locker room facilities for student use. Students should be provided with appropriate locations to change their clothes for physical activity.

4. **Is supervision required while students are in locker rooms?**

   Yes, locker rooms must be supervised by a school staff member. Locker rooms should be safe and clean, and provide privacy. All measures should be taken to provide an appropriate location. School districts and schools are responsible for decisions related to supervising locker rooms.
1. What is the California physical fitness test (PFT)?

Public school students in grades five, seven, and nine are required to take the PFT, whether or not they are enrolled in a physical education class or participate in a block schedule. These students include those enrolled in elementary, high, and unified school districts, county offices of education, and charter schools. School districts should also test all students in alternate programs, including, but not limited to, continuation schools, independent study, community day schools, county community schools, and non-public schools. Students who are physically unable to take the entire test battery are to be given as much of the test as conditions permit (EC Section 60800 and 5 CCR, Section 1041). For more information on the PFT, visit the CDE physical fitness test Web page.