New data shows PE hours continue to be squeezed in schools

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Youth Sport Trust's PE and School Sport Report warns of the danger of pushing PE down the agenda as worrying trends in children's health and activity levels persist

New government show PE continues to account for a smaller share of teaching time in secondary schools than in previous years. Since the London 2012 Olympics, the amount of curriculum time spent doing PE has fallen from 8.6% to 7.3%, despite evidence showing that physical activity supports academic performance through improved brain function, learning and memory.

In comparison, a number of academic subjects have all seen curriculum time increase, including Maths from 12.4% to 14.3%, English from 12.6% to 14.1%, Combined Science from 10.8% to 11.9%. In response, leading children's charity Youth Sport Trust is warning that reducing time for physical activity in favour of increased academic teaching is a false economy, and is calling for PE time to be better protected to help children thrive both physically and academically.

The charity's PE and School Sport Report 2026, launching on 10th June 2026, is an annual analysis of the state of PE, sport and physical activity for young people across the UK. This year's report paints a picture of a generation moving too little, with increasing time spent online and many facing widening inequalities in access to sport and physical activity, leaving many at greater risk of the lifelong consequences associated with poor physical development.

Whilst many schools remain committed to supporting young people's health and wellbeing, they are increasingly working under significant pressures, balancing competing demands on curriculum time, staffing and resources. The findings highlight the need for support and investment to help schools provide every child with regular opportunities to be physically active.

The report's annual analysis of children's physical activity highlights:

- 2.1 million young people in England do less than an average of 30 minutes of physical activity per day
- Just 46% of young people are active for 30 minutes during the school day
- PE is the most frequently cancelled subject in schools
- Only 57% of teachers say their school delivers the recommended minimum of two hours of PE each week
- One in three young people spend at least three hours per day on screens outside schoolwork and this figure is predicted to rise to almost half of young people by 2035.
- 77% of parents also believe screen use is reducing the amount of time children spend being physically active and 69% of teachers agree that pupils are less physically active when they have access to mobile phones during break and lunchtime

With ongoing national debate around children's screen time and the long-term impact of digital habits on young people's development and wellbeing, 1 in 6 parents say their child has stopped doing exercise or sport because they are too busy on a screen.

Beyond physical health, regular movement is essential for supporting concentration, cognitive, physical and social development, mental health and overall resilience, helping to counterbalance the effects of increasingly sedentary lifestyles. Furthermore, PE and school sport has a positive effect on student's sense of belonging and connection in school, impacting performance, behaviour and attendance in school years and beyond. With the recent Milburn review pointing to school absence and exclusion as the biggest driving forces behind children becoming more likely to end up not in education, employment or training, PE serves a key function in improving end of school outcomes for young people.

Read the full report here.

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Ali Oliver MBE, Youth Sport Trust CEO, said, “At a time when children are less active, struggling with their wellbeing, and spending increasing amounts of time on screens, we are continuing to see fewer opportunities for movement during the school day. Schools have a unique ability to reach every child and help ensure all young people, regardless of background or the opportunities available to them outside school, can be physically active. Yet with just 46% of young people achieving 30 active minutes during the school day and PE accounting for a smaller proportion of curriculum time than in previous years, there is much to do.

“For years there has been a gradual erosion of PE's place within the curriculum - once again we are sounding a warning bell and calling for change. The findings in this year’s PE and School Sport report highlight why we have consistently championed a new approach - investment, policy and strategy in recent years failed to shift the dial, particularly for those facing the greatest inequalities, and without urgent change yet another generation will experience the life-long legacy of an inactive and play-deprived childhood for years to come.

“Schools have a unique role to play helping children to move more and build the social and cultural capital that comes from sport, but they need the incentive, capacity and local support networks to help them. Across the world, the nations with the highest life satisfaction among children and those highest in the PISA league tables all have national campaigns, strategies or legislation underpinning active and well schools. In England, we are optimistic about plans for a new National Network for PE and School Sport and look forward to continuing to identify and disseminate effective practice both across the UK and internationally.”

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