



# Physical Education in Schools

**IPPN Position Paper**

**March 2016**

## **Table of Contents**

1	Background .....	1
2	Context.....	2
3	The Issue .....	3
4	IPPN Recommendations .....	4
5	Conclusions .....	5

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## 1 BACKGROUND

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IPPN is the officially-recognised professional body for the leaders of Irish primary schools. It is an independent, not-for-profit voluntary association with a local, regional and national presence. Recognised by the Minister for Education as an official *Education Partner*, IPPN works with the DES, the National Parents' Council, management bodies, unions, education agencies, academic institutions and children's charities towards the advancement of primary education. IPPN articulates the collective knowledge and professional experience of over 6,600 Principals and Deputy Principals.

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## 2 CONTEXT

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IPPN has made various submissions to government in recent years in relation to the resourcing and the emphasis placed on the teaching of Physical Education (PE) in our primary schools. Evidence continues to mount that lifestyle practices are contributing to an increase in passive activities amongst children. The ESRI *Growing Up in Ireland* research initiated in 2009 pinpointed this emerging reality when it revealed that more than a quarter of our nine year olds were overweight. The seriousness of the situation has escalated considerably since that initial report.

IPPN believes that a renewed focus on encouraging physical activities at primary school level is both necessary and desirable. This focus must also encompass other areas of the primary school curriculum such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Emotional Wellbeing. The primary school curriculum must strike a balance between learning and physical and emotional wellbeing, a balance that currently does not exist.

While IPPN is not advocating that a renewed focus on physical education in our primary schools will solve all fitness-related issues in society, the recent World Health Organisation data (April 2015), which shows that close to 350,000 children are estimated to be either overweight or obese in Ireland (more than half the primary school going population), is truly a frightening statistic.

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### 3 THE ISSUE

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International research clearly points to the positive effects of physical activity in supporting a healthy mind and body. International health experts recommend 45 minutes of vigorous physical activity per day for primary school children, though all of this does not necessarily have to be engaged in during school hours. International education systems reflect this reality through appropriate accommodation of adequate PE timetabling in the curriculum.

Our European neighbours place a far higher emphasis on PE than we do in Ireland. England, Scotland and Portugal timetable PE for 2 hours per week at primary level. The Polish education system goes even further by timetabling an allocation of 3 hours per week.

Further afield, PE is a mandatory subject in most Asian countries. In South Korea, it is mandatory to timetable PE in primary schools for 3 hours per week while in Singapore 2 hours is allocated in addition to compulsory fitness tests. In Canada, there is an allotment of 20 minutes of physical activity per day and the majority of schools in the US, with the exception of seriously deprived areas, have PE for 40 minutes four times weekly. The situation is broadly similar in New Zealand with a weekly allocation of 2 hours or 30 minutes physical activity per day.

#### **Towards Active Bodies and Minds**

Learning must be a holistic experience for all children and there is an onus on schools to promote a healthy active lifestyle to complement other school learning experiences. In that regard, increased investment in physical education would enable schools to provide that holistic experience and would simultaneously shave millions of euro off future health budgets.

Research indicates that there is a strong link between obesity and low levels of physical activity. There is also evidence to suggest that there is an equally strong link between obesity and socio-economic disadvantage. Schools in disadvantaged areas do not possess fundraising capabilities and depend entirely on Department funding to purchase, replace and upgrade PE equipment. Unfortunately, grants supporting Physical Education in schools have dried up completely in recent years.

IPPN believes that strong leadership is required to address children's diet, exercise and fitness and that partnership with parents is central to that. The proposed Parent and Student Charter is most welcome in that regard as it should strengthen the relationship between schools, parents and students and provide a platform to agitate for initiatives that will bring about change.

Government policy at present is not supporting schools in fostering healthy living and emotional well being from an early age. This failure is being reflected in a changing mental health landscape in schools. An IPPN survey conducted in January 2015 revealed that the number of principals who saw obesity as the greatest challenge impacting on children's welfare had doubled in 5 years. In that same survey, 89% of the 810 respondents said that the time allocated to both PE and SPHE in schools should be increased despite the fact that schools already operate an overcrowded curriculum.

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## 4 IPPN RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on survey returns, research data and feedback from school leaders nationally, IPPN puts forward the following recommendations to the various Departments of government:

- IPPN advocates the concept of 'Physical Literacy' where a school, under the leadership and guidance of the Principal, promotes the holistic development of the child including physical competence, motivation, confidence and knowledge and understanding of the importance of physical health.
- Increase the curriculum time allocated to physical education activities to two hours per week, which may include 30 minutes taught through the medium of Gaeilge.
- Physical Education should be integrated meaningfully into other strands of the curriculum such as music and drama.
- The promotion of a physical education atmosphere in schools such as the provision of designated play areas for Junior and Senior Infant pupils and activity-based initiatives.
- The provision of a multi-annual budget to purchase, replace or upgrade indoor and outdoor physical education equipment.
- Adequate funding to cover all strands of the PE curriculum.
- The provision of indoor and outdoor PE facilities in all schools to ensure the various strands of the curriculum can be delivered.
- The development of a national strategy for Emotional Wellbeing.
- Double the time allocation for the teaching of SPHE in our primary schools to 1 hour per week.
- The new 4-year Initial Teacher Training course should contain a renewed emphasis on dedicated PE modules containing clearly-defined learning outcomes. A module dedicated to Health and Nutrition would also provide newly-qualified teachers with the tools to promote a positive attitude towards healthy foods and healthy living.
- The provision of ongoing professional development for all teachers in the areas of physical education and emotional well-being.
- A total ban on the targeting of children by multi-national companies in their quest to increase market share of unhealthy food products.

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## 5 CONCLUSIONS

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The sedentary lifestyle that modern living habits has bequeathed us renders it essential that a broad and balanced Physical Education curriculum be at the core of children's learning, enabling physical and social skills to develop and lifelong patterns of physical activity to be formed. Successive governments have failed to recognise the ticking time bombs of children's increasingly sedentary lifestyles and the resultant impact on emotional wellbeing and levels of obesity. The curriculum as it is currently constituted does not provide an antidote to these emerging problems.

IPPN calls on government to implement a renewed focus on physical education and emotional wellbeing in our primary schools. This renewed focus must centre primarily on increased financial and physical support for schools, in their continuing quest to guide children through the minefields of modern society.