



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

**MAKING THE CASE FOR
INCLUSIVE QUALITY
PHYSICAL EDUCATION
POLICY DEVELOPMENT:
A POLICY BRIEF**



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United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Making the case for inclusive Quality Physical Education policy development: a policy brief

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This evidence-based policy brief presents the benefits of investing in inclusive *quality* physical education (QPE) policy development. Content draws directly on findings from in-country interventions which demonstrate the value of inter-sectoral partnerships in QPE policy development and the delivery of low cost/high impact QPE programming which stands to accelerate post-COVID recovery efforts. A series of practical recommendations are included for public and private stakeholders in the sport-education ecosystem, alongside resources to support the implementation of recommendations.

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FOREWORD



Sports and physical activity are central to health, as COVID so cruelly illustrated. Almost a quarter of the world's population have an underlying condition which increases their vulnerability to the virus, with higher death rates among people suffering from obesity and

other problems that physical activity can help alleviate. There is also what some have called a parallel epidemic of mental health problems among those forced into involuntary inactivity, particularly young people. For example, the US National Institute of Mental Health notes that, at 29.4%, young adults aged 18-25 years have the highest prevalence of any mental illness.

Yet levels of physical activity were dropping even before the pandemic, with more than 80% of youth leading sedentary lifestyles. The situation is particularly worrying for adolescent girls: 84% of schoolgirls do not meet WHO recommendations on physical activity.

There are solutions to these problems. If done right, physical education (PE) can improve children's mental and emotional well-being, and help them develop social and intellectual skills that will serve them throughout their lives, showing them the value of team work, merit, effort, and accountability. In other words, "education" should be just as important as "physical" in PE. That is why UNESCO is promoting "quality PE", an approach that integrates critical thinking and values with the capacities traditional PE tries to strengthen.

Quality physical education is a low-cost/high impact action which yields dividends in health savings, educational outcomes and individual resilience. Participation in quality physical education lessons can reduce obesity by 30%, has been associated with 40% higher test scores, and can translate to a 30% reduction in depression and anxiety, particularly amongst girls and young women.

Quality PE can achieve a lot, but it cannot do it alone. We need systemic change, incorporating the sport, education, health and youth sectors. To deliver impact at scale, we need to transform behaviours, build skills, empower learners, and engage their communities in parallel. This should happen throughout people's lives, starting in childhood and at school, in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). SDG 4 on education calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. SDG 3 advocates the promotion of healthy lifestyles and well-being. SDG 5 calls for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Quality physical education policy and programming provides a pathway to pursue all these goals, and to accelerate COVID recovery efforts.

UNESCO's quality physical education resource package, including a tried and tested participatory policy revision methodology, provides the means of implementing a cohesive national vision using partnerships to enhance policy planning, design and implementation.

We are confident that this evidence-based policy brief on *Making the case for inclusive quality physical education policy development* will provide inspiration, ideas and practical solutions to national governments, sport organizations, the private sector and civil society on how to use sports to deliver inclusive education, sustainable development and the future-proofing of our societies.



Gabriela Ramos

Assistant Director General for Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Special thanks go to our engaged and committed partners at the International Olympic Committee whose financial support made this publication possible.

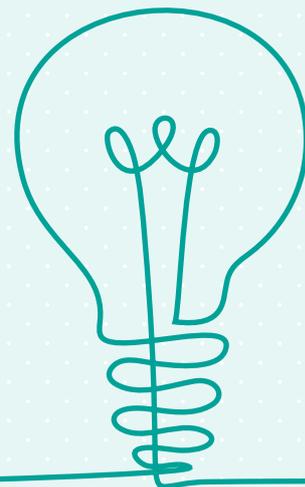
We would also like to acknowledge the constructive and substantive input from colleagues in UNESCO and in fellow UN agencies who provided expertise in the areas of policy development, youth engagement, gender equality, education and health. Of particular note, was the leadership of Nancy McLennan who spearheaded all stages of this publication's development, as well as the commitment and contributions of Arilí Aguirre García and Victoire Aimé who assisted.

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INTRODUCTION

“Physical education, physical activity and sport can yield a wide range of benefits to individuals, communities and society at large.”

Article 2: [UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport](#)

Sustainable development starts with active, healthy and physically engaged citizens. The importance of good health and the inadequacies of existing health infrastructures have been brought into sharp focus during the COVID pandemic. Addressing health gaps will be critical to recovery efforts. Schools are a natural entry-point to trigger transformative behavioural shifts related to healthy lifestyles. As such, investment in an innovative and integrated delivery of education, exercise and good nutrition should be considered as a key component of recovery efforts.

It is well known that individual engagement in targeted, values-based interventions in sport, physical education and physical activity increases physical and mental health. Engagement in active, values-infused learning environments, like quality physical education classes, also boosts intellectual, individual and emotional capital. This translates to an acceleration of socio-emotional skills acquisition that grow the confidence of students and, in turn, build the psycho-social resilience necessary to respond creatively and effectively to future crises whether related to health, employment or inclusion. See the [QPE infographic](#) for more information.

PUTTING THE QUALITY IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

What is it?

Quality physical education is distinct from physical education. Critical distinctions relate primarily to frequency, variety, inclusivity and meaning or value content. *Quality* physical education places emphasis on peer-led learning and rounded skill development.

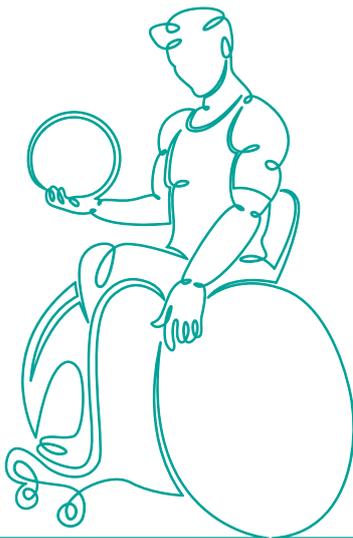
Why?

Investment in QPE supports students to develop the physical, social and emotional skills which define healthy, resilient and socially responsible citizens.

How?

Have a look at [UNESCO's Quality Physical Education Policy package](#) for more information and practical tools to support the delivery of inclusive, values-driven physical education in your country.

Considering the combined educational and health outcomes, *quality* physical education lessons provide a low cost/high impact opportunity for governments. By fusing physical, mental and social learning domains, engagement in *quality* physical education curricula exposes students to a dynamic range of experiences which build on educational outcomes related to literacy and numeracy. Students participating in quality physical education, delivered using creative, values-based teaching and learning practices, are empowered to think critically and equipped to communicate effectively. These are skills which are vital to recovery, future proofing and the uprooting of pervasive social inequalities.



KEY COMPONENTS OF INCLUSIVE, IMPACT-ORIENTED POLICY DEVELOPMENT:

Local ownership: Policy should meet the local needs and work within local processes.

Participation: All relevant stakeholders should be encouraged to participate in the policy development process.

Inclusiveness: All should feel they have a stake in the policy, including representatives of disadvantaged populations.

Gender sensitivity: Policy development should be viewed through a gender lens to reveal the ways content, process and approach is informed by, shaped by or biased towards a male or female perspective or experience.

Empowerment: Policy should empower at risk or marginalized populations.

“ The [Cali Commitment to Equity and Inclusion in Education](#) defines inclusion as “a transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education. ”

Article 2: [UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport](#)

BENEFITS OF INVESTING

- ✓ Regular participation in physical activity **reduces the risk** of heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs);
- ✓ Investments in prevention and control of NCDs offer a **high return for countries at all income levels**, contributing to economic growth; in the long term, NCD prevention offers a higher return on investment than NCD control;



INVESTING IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
CAN SAVE UP TO

USD 2,741

PER YEAR PER PERSON

- ✓ Participation in daily physical activity including tailored programmes like QPE can **reduce obesity by 30%** and has been associated with 40% higher academic test scores;
- ✓ Sport and PE's benefits are associated with lower rates of anxiety and can translate to a **30% reduction in depression** and other chronic mental health conditions. It also contributes to lower levels of stress, increase self-esteem and confidence, reduce risk of suicide, substance abuse and risky behaviours;
- ✓ Quality PE contributes to developing **skills and values** which build socio-emotional, mental and physical resilience and support critical thinking;
- ✓ Quality Physical Education drives inclusion and supports empowerment of girls and persons with disabilities, encourages intercultural dialogue and understanding, and challenges stigma.

COSTS OF NOT INVESTING

- ✗ Insufficient physical activity is a **key risk factor for NCDs**;



PHYSICAL INACTIVITY
CONTRIBUTES TO

5 MILLION

PREMATURE DEATHS ANNUALLY

- ✗ Physical inactivity causes **more deaths than smoking**;
- ✗ Adolescent **girls are less physically active than boys**: 84% of schoolgirls and 78% of schoolboys do not meet WHO recommendations on physical activity which is fueling an inactivity crisis and spike in NCDs;
- ✗ Across the adult lifespan and in countries of all income levels, the **health burden** from NCDs is higher in women than in men which perpetuates gender inequality;
- ✗ Physical inactivity costs the global economy close to **70 billion USD: 54 billion in healthcare expenses and 14 billion in productivity losses**.



81%

OF STUDENTS 11-17 YEARS
WORLDWIDE DO LESS THAN 60
MINUTES OF EXERCISE PER DAY

Investing in *quality* physical education = advancing international development agendas

Investing in *quality* physical education means investing in gender equality, inclusion, good health and wellbeing, *quality* education and employability. Physical education can directly contribute to the implementation of international development agendas including the

[United Nations Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), [UNESCO’s Kazan Action Plan \(KAP\)](#), the [World Health Organization’s Global Action Plan on Physical Activity \(GAPPA\)](#), the [Beijing Platform for Action](#), and others.

UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

- 3 Good Health and Well-Being
- 4 *Quality* Education
- 5 Gender Equality
- 17 Partnerships

WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION GLOBAL ACTION PLAN ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Contributes to all 4 strategic objectives:

- 1 Create active societies
- 2 Create active environments
- 3 Create active people
- 4 Create active systems

UNESCO’S KAZAN ACTION PLAN

Policy areas 1.3 (Foster *quality* physical education and active schools) and II.3 (Provide *quality* education, and promote lifelong learning for all and skills development through sport).

BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

- Women and health
- Education and training of women
- Women and power and decision making
- The girl child
- Violence against women



CREATING IMPACT THROUGH MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS

“ One of the most remarkable and significant global initiatives in Physical Education of the last century. ”

The Institute for Sport and Development (South Africa)

AN INTERNATIONAL CASE-STUDY – THE QPE POLICY PROJECT

UNESCO implemented a global Quality Physical Education Policy Project in four pilot countries (Fiji, Mexico, South Africa and Zambia) from 2016-2018. The project was designed with the input of more than 50 organizations and individual experts from all world regions. In-country interventions aimed at practically supporting governments to develop inclusive, child-centered physical education policy which supports skills acquisition. Each country received a comprehensive policy project package encompassing technical, procedural and advocacy content.

An emphasis was placed on the broad-based participation of stakeholders from sport, education and health sectors at policy- and community-levels. International advocacy and in-country interventions were funded by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Nike with implementation and in-kind support from an international compact of partners.



A tangible return on investment was identified in each participating country by independent project evaluators from the Institute for Sport and Development (ISD), as stated in the *QPE Policy Project: Analysis of process, content and impact*. Project highlights included the adoption of Fiji's first ever PE policy, an inter-ministerial PE policy strategy in Mexico, critical landscaping exercises to inform impact-oriented QPE policy implementation in South Africa and a QPE policy implementation framework in Zambia. As a direct result of the interactive and participatory nature of the project, which engaged policy-makers alongside teachers, NGOs, academics, sport organizations and youth, the national policy documents included innovative roadmaps on inclusive planning, programming and practice; creative initiatives to support teacher training; platforms for the participatory development of student-centered curricula, and the development of comprehensive mechanisms for effective communication both to the general public and between national ministries of education, health, sport and youth.

The substantive and procedural benefits of multi-stakeholder partnerships which were demonstrated in the development and adoption of the QPE policy instruments are ever more relevant in the current climate marked by economic downfall and stretched governmental capacities. This context and related recovery efforts amplify the rationale for an integrated approach to PE policy planning, development and implementation. In short, drawing on the expertise and input of public/private partner compacts in the fields of education, health, sport and youth stands to deliver significant cost savings and enhance policy content, communication and implementation.



INTEGRATED VISION BUILDING: THE BENEFITS OF A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACH TO POLICY DESIGN

GLOBAL PARTNER COMPACT: AMPLIFYING ADVOCACY AND IMPACT

“Global, multi-stakeholder partnerships are necessary to achieve sustainable development. The outcomes of the QPE policy project reflect the success of this partnership compact approach to sport-policy design. We hope it is used as a model to strengthen inclusive and participatory approaches in other sectors also.”

Gabriela Ramos, Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO

An inclusive strategy for education must be overarching and designed to combat all forms of disadvantage and discrimination including those based on socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and special needs. *Quality* education not only requires resourcing but creative teaching and learning strategies which leave no-one behind. At an international level, this means global networks and partnership compacts need to work to mobilize resources and technical support for low-income countries and disadvantaged communities within countries.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE:

- ✓ The engagement of a global partnership compact in the design and implementation of the *QPE Policy Project* supported resource mobilization, the provision of high-quality guidance and amplified advocacy around the benefits of investment in *quality* PE programming which created a positive momentum for the project and encouraged additional countries to pick up the baton on a self-funded basis.



INTER-MINISTERIAL COOPERATION: INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT EQUALS IMPACT IN IMPLEMENTATION

“ Participating in the Quality Physical Education Policy Project gave Zambia a strategic opportunity to strengthen and systematize cooperation between national sport, education and health ministries. The inter-ministerial approach to the design of the country’s PE policy implementation framework resulted in a series of action-oriented provisions on physical education which are coherent with national health and education agendas. This was the first time these inter-connections between sport, education and health policies have featured explicitly in a national policy document. ”

Bessie Malilwe Chelemu, Former Director of Sports, Ministry of Youth and Sport, Zambia

A *quality* physical education policy should draw on the expertise of stakeholders in health, education, youth, sport and gender equality ministries. An inter-ministerial approach ensures coherence in policy design, commitments and budgeting which supports the integrated implementation of all related policy frameworks, pools capacities and delivers short-, medium- and long-term cost savings in education and health.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE:

- ✓ Close cooperation between Zambia’s ministries of education and youth and sport facilitated by the QPE project’s participatory approach, highlighted the value of inter-ministerial exchange and resulted in the development of a national physical education implementation framework that establishes clear, cross-cutting objectives to achieve *quality* physical education, active lifestyles and rounded development in the country.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS: MUTUALIZING BENEFITS

“ The QPE Policy project was a unique and rewarding opportunity for us to collaborate with public-sector and community-based stakeholders. We appreciated learning about the policy instrument during its development and engaging closely with the team working on its elaboration. This engagement helped inform our contribution to quality PE in elementary schools as part of Nike’s Made to Play commitment to get kids active. ”

Kelly Lau, Senior Director, Social & Community Impact, Nike

Public-private partnerships can provide critical intellectual and capital resourcing in the implementation of *quality* physical education policy frameworks and integrated sport-education-health and gender equality agendas at national and local levels.

Partnerships between national authorities, sports organizations and the private sector can support healthy lifestyles and activity beyond the school day, carry over learning from *quality* physical education classes to community settings and fill capacity gaps in terms of infrastructure and expertise.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE:

- ✓ The QPE project methodology facilitated the inclusion and engagement of actors from the private sector and the sport movement at all stages and levels (international/national/local) of the project implementation. In Mexico, Nike were engaged to provide support in assessing implementation gaps in the existing PE policy framework. This resulted in a *National Strategy for the Provision of Quality Physical Education*, approved by education, health and sport ministries alongside private sector actors, which contains clear recommendations on inclusion of minorities, provision of inclusive facilities, and related communications.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: ANCHORING OWNERSHIP AND ENSURING RELEVANCE

“ One of the strengths of the quality physical education policy revision process in Fiji was the inclusion of all kinds of stakeholders from children to youth; teachers to parents and guardians; policy experts to physical education specialists. This was achieved by creating a diverse national team of PE experts and enthusiasts who drove the process with energy despite limited resourcing. Thanks to herculean efforts of the national QPE team, ideas for policy content were discussed in local languages and consultations were held all across the country. The extensive nature of the consultations held resulted in a policy document that responds to local needs and which the national population feels ownership of. ”

Margaret Eastgate, National QPE Coordinator, Fiji

Broad-based community engagement, particularly the inclusion of voices traditionally marginalized from policy processes e.g. women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, is vital to increase the relevance and inclusivity of policy content, ensure upstream policy objectives are in sync with grassroots needs and capacity gaps, and to build national consensus to strengthen implementation. A participatory and intersectional approach to policy development also supports its transformative potential i.e. ability to trigger wholesale shifts in behaviour related to healthy lifestyles. A consolidated feedback chain (local-national) can be supported through an iterative approach to policy design which prioritizes meaningful civil engagement through phased consultations (online/ in-person) with different demographic groups living in both urban and rural areas.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE:

✓ A participatory, integrated and bottom-up approach represents the foundation of the QPE Policy project methodology. This interactive and inclusive approach to policy design was implemented in all engaged countries. In Fiji, more than 1,390 students, 330 teachers and 990 parents from 197 schools were engaged in the development of the country's first ever PE policy via a series of consultations and workshops. The high level of engagement with grassroots stakeholders led to the adoption of a comprehensive, coherent and integrated vision of QPE which responds to identified needs and which can be used as a benchmark for other countries with nascent PE policy frameworks.

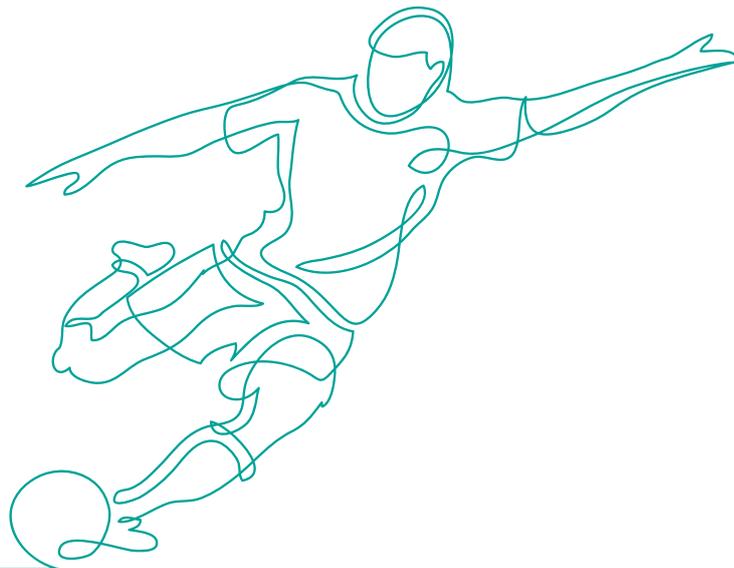
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

“ The freedom to develop physical, psychological and social well-being and capabilities through physical education, physical activity and sport must be supported by all governmental, sport and educational institutions. ”

Article 1.2: [UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport](#)

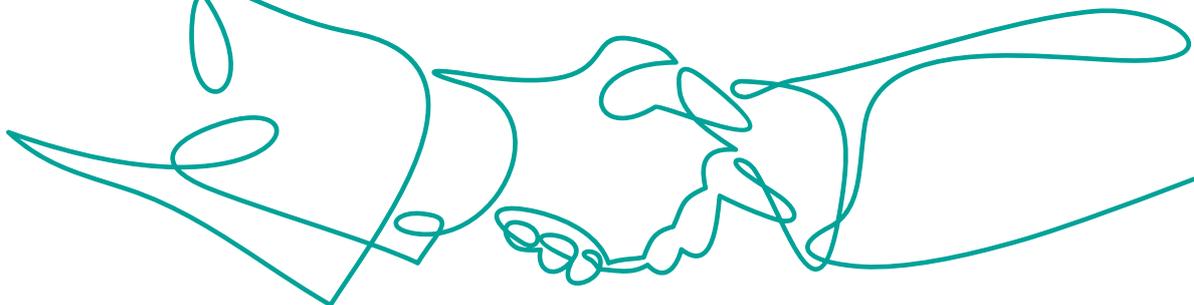
Quality physical education has an important role to play in the development of a world where no one is left behind and where citizens are healthy, resilient and equipped with the socio-emotional skills needed to navigate life transitions. Physical literacy and critical thinking are key complements to numeracy and literacy. Accordingly, the return on capital investment and the broad-based educational outcomes of participation in QPE which is inclusive, child-centered and supported by specialized educators should be reflected in national resilience and recovery plans.

In recognition of the combined power of the sport-education ecosystems which represent governmental, NGO, industry, elite and grassroots actors, the following recommendations are directed towards different stakeholder groups with the aim of supporting an integrated approach to national sport-education-health vision building.



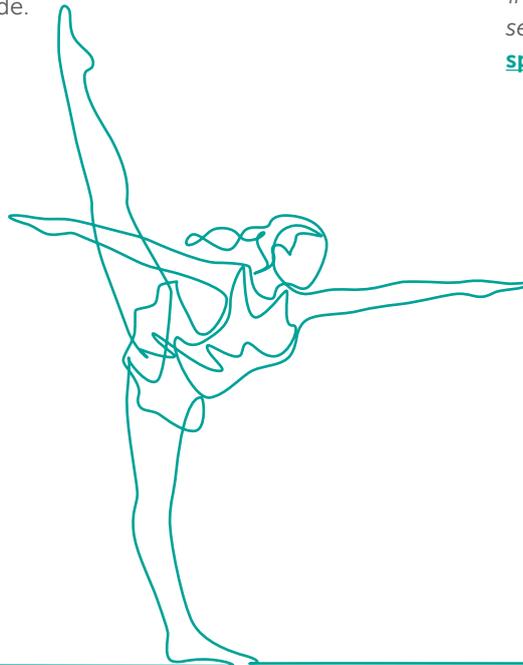
GOVERNMENTS

- Review and revise PE policy documents in line with UNESCO's [Quality Physical Education Policy Guidelines](#) and [Policy Revision Methodology](#);
- Establish a network or platform to facilitate knowledge sharing and cooperation between national ministries responsible for education, finance, health, gender equality and women's rights, sport and youth;
- Support inter-regional exchange to share knowledge, good practice, pool capacities and promote the value of integrated vision building between health, sport, education, youth and gender equality sectors;
- Invest in a public/private sector sport-education-health dialogue to strengthen engagement between interest groups, exchange good practice and map resourcing (intellectual, financial, infrastructure) in support of integrated policy implementation and the delivery of *quality* physical education in schools;
- Organize a series of thematic workshops including *inter alia* teachers, values education experts, as well as experts on inclusive praxis with respect to gender equality and persons with disabilities, youth, sports and health professionals, and academics to discuss the development of an integrated sport-education strategy which supports the implementation of existing policy frameworks and provides good practice examples for integrated delivery in schools;
- Explore opportunities to invest in inclusive, gender-transformative education and training delivered through multiple media, including accessible technology, as a means of mitigating the gendered nature of the digital divide and enhancing gender parity among PE trainers, educators and other public sector employees;
- Review national monitoring and evaluation systems to mainstream an intersectional approach to data collection supported by the development of disaggregated indicators (e.g. gender, ethnicity, disability) which capture the differentiated impact of QPE on students;
- Engage young people, and other groups traditionally marginalized from formal policy development processes, via interactive, online and in-person consultations and events to enhance the relevance of national PE policy content and increase local ownership.



PRIVATE SECTOR SPONSORS AND SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

- Expand investment beyond sport to directly support the provision of *quality* physical education in schools and the strengthening of school-community pathways which support the translation of educational outcomes into “real world” settings;
- Explore opportunities to innovate and partner with local, national and regional education bodies in the delivery of *quality* physical education;
- Support countries and action in the field by disseminating the *Quality* Physical Education resources through networks and promoting engagement in the work;
- Pledge in-kind, intellectual or financial support to help additional countries revise PE policy in line with UNESCO’s *Quality* Physical Education resources, as well as to engage in related activities and interventions in the area of sport-education;
- Contribute in-kind support to the development of digital tools, including online applications and training, that deliver accessible, inclusive sport-education and help decrease the gendered and intersectional nature of the digital divide.



CIVIL SOCIETY

- Support countries and action in the field by disseminating information on sport-education projects and promoting the *Quality* Physical Education [resource package](#) through networks and in social media including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.;
- Use the *Quality* Physical Education resource package, notably the [Policy Guidelines](#), [Infographic](#), and [Advocacy Toolkit](#), to advocate the value of revising PE policy to align with the international good practice;
- Create opportunities for engagement and promotion by organizing online or in-person events and training which focus on *Quality* Physical Education development and delivery;
- Provide support to youth organizations and young people to amplify their voices, promote good practice examples of grassroots PE and sport-education projects to decision-makers, and to engage directly in policy development by sharing and using UNESCO’s [QPE Policy Advocacy Toolkit](#);
- Innovate, engage and share your good practice with UNESCO by tagging @UNESCO in your promotion efforts and by using the hashtags #Active4Life and #QPE4Life. *Good practices can also be shared by sending information on the initiative to sport@unesco.org.*

SPOTLIGHT

DIGITALIZATION: INNOVATIVE ONLINE WORKING METHODS

Digitalizing international and national resources (guidelines, action plans, consultations, questionnaires) supports open access and increases the engagement of civil society in policy development processes. However, consideration should be given to the intersectional nature of the digital divide and the need to provide low-tech alternatives for individuals or communities without access to online technologies and/or the skill set to navigate online content. Of equal importance is the inclusive development of technological infrastructure and the targeted provision of training/ capacity-building tools to marginalized communities as a means of decreasing the digital divide in the longer term.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

- ✓ In Mexico, the QPE implementation strategy is supported by a free access online MOOC which trains PE teachers on QPE delivery.
- ✓ In South Africa, the broad-based engagement of civil-society stakeholders and private sector representatives in the policy revision process was maximized by the delivery of online training and grassroots consultations.



SPOTLIGHT

ADVOCACY: GROWING REACH AND IMPACT

Advocacy is a critical component of building consensus amongst stakeholder groups in sport, education and health, as well as amongst civil society more broadly. Advocacy was a major component of the work of the QPE project's global partner compact. Participating countries were provided with advocacy materials, including an indicative national-level advocacy and communications strategy and related training. As a result, each national context saw an exponential growth in PE-related activities during the project implementation.



GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES:

MEXICO

- ✓ An International [Congress on Quality Physical Education](#)
- ✓ An academic forum
- ✓ A [video](#) explaining the QPE project

SOUTH AFRICA

- ✓ An African [Physical Education symposium](#) held in Pretoria
- ✓ The celebration of a Physical Education Month in the country
- ✓ A dedicated [magazine](#) #Active4life was developed and disseminated to local schools to support project implementation and provide practical advice about healthy lifestyles.

ZAMBIA

- ✓ A National Stakeholders Workshop was held targeting national media engagement in the project, as well as a broad cross-section of other stakeholder groups.
- ✓ A resource mobilization meeting was held to advocate investment in the project to ministries of education, health, sport, youth and finance.

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MAKE THE CHANGE:

Want to know more?

- [QPE website](#)
- [QPE infographic](#)
- [QPE video](#)
- [QPE Guidelines](#)
- [QPE Policy Revision Methodology](#)
- [How to influence the development of quality physical education policy: A policy Advocacy Toolkit for youth](#)
- QPE Policy Project: Analysis of process, content and impact

Please contact Nancy McLennan (sport@unesco.org) for further information on the project and opportunities to engage.



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