This fact sheet aims to provide definitions to develop a consistent language across teachers and families. The definitions outline the difference between physical activity, physical education, physical literacy and school sport.

Structured physical activity can be planned for any time during the school day, such as recess, lunch, or during other learning experiences run by the school.

The Sport and Physical Activity Policy outlines the requirements related to mandatory weekly participation in sport and physical activity for schools and their students. Planned physical activity includes physical education, weekly sport, and other structured physical activities.

The Sport and Physical Activity Policy and the Sport safety guidelines should inform all school sport and physical activity programs and practices.

Physical literacy

Physical literacy is “the motivation, confidence, physical competence, understanding and knowledge to maintain physical activity at an individually appropriate level, throughout life” (Whitehead, 2006).

Physical literacy can be understood as a goal of student participation in and learning through physical activity, School Sport and Physical Education. Schools are an ideal setting to promote and support physical literacy.

Physical activity

Physical activity is any movement of the body that results in some expenditure of energy. Physical activity provides an opportunity for students to acquire and practise a range of personal, interpersonal, behavioural, social and cognitive skills. Physical activity provides the most health-related benefits for students when performed at moderate to vigorous levels of intensity.

Moderate intensity physical activities require some effort and noticeably accelerate the heart rate. Students are still able to talk while participating in the activities. Vigorous intensity physical activities require a large amount of effort and a substantial increase in heart rate. These activities make students ‘huff and puff’.

Mandatory planned physical activity occurs through teaching and learning in Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) and School Sport. Additional physical activity can be planned or occur incidentally at other times of the school day such as at recess, lunch or in any other learning experience.
Physical Education (PE)

Physical Education (PE) is part of the mandatory key learning area Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE).

The NSW PDHPE syllabuses prescribe a sequence of learning from Kindergarten to Year 12. Physical Education aims to influence the cognitive, affective and psychomotor development of students.

NSW syllabus documents detail the expected learning for students in terms of the skills, knowledge, values and attitudes required to be confident and competent participants in physical activity across their life course.

School Sport

School sport is a mandatory part of whole school planning. School Sport offers students weekly planned opportunities to participate in physical activities according to their interests and abilities in a range of contexts and environments.

For weekly timetabled school sport, schools are able to design their own programs.

Schools can elect to participate in the Representative School Sport Pathway. The pathway offers a wide range of sports for students to participate in at local, state, national and international level through carnivals, knockouts and representative teams. Some schools participate in this within their weekly timetabled school sport and others in addition to.

Figure 1: An overview of planned physical activity in the NSW government school setting.

For more information access the department’s websites:

Physical Literacy
PDHPE
School Sport