The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed how our schools operate and has illuminated the need to prioritize students’ safety, health, and well-being. As school leaders work to create a new instructional model for the 2020-2021 academic year, we must consider students’ physical, mental, and social-emotional health above all else. And, an important part of the solution must be health and physical education.

During a global health crisis such as this, developing physically literate and health literate students is more important than ever. Health education is where students develop the ability to access, understand, appraise, apply, and advocate for health information and services in order to maintain or enhance their own health and the health of others. In physical education, students develop the ability to move with competence and confidence in a wide variety of physical activities in multiple environments that benefit the healthy development of the whole person. These skills will help our students navigate their new reality not only during this pandemic but in the future as well.

Health and physical educators are on the front lines of the social and emotional learning (SEL) movement. In preparing for school reentry, incorporating SEL will be essential to best support our students. Both health and physical education instruction naturally reinforce and align with CASEL’s Core SEL Competencies by teaching students skills like teamwork, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, stress management, problem-solving, and goal-setting. These skills help support students’ health, well-being, and resilience, making health and physical education especially important right now during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our schools also play a vital role in ensuring children and adolescents get the nationally recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day. Yet due to COVID-19, student access to school-based physical education and physical activity have been greatly limited due to school, park, and playground closures. Compounding these concerns, low-income students, students with disabilities, and students of color historically lack access to safe places to play, physical activity equipment, and physical education instruction delivered by certified physical educators.

It’s because of these realities that our schools *must* offer physical education and health education as part of a well-rounded education for all students, regardless of whether we will be providing in-school learning, distance learning, or using a hybrid learning approach.

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators has released guidance titled, [School Reentry Considerations: K-12 Physical Education, Health Education, and Physical Activity](https://www.shapeamerica.org/advocacy/Reentry/K-12_School_Re-entry_Considerations.aspx), which is intended to guide administrators, staff, and teachers in preparing an environment for safe and supportive instruction. This document clearly shows that health and physical education can be conducted safely in all models of learning and will be vital our students’ school experience, this year and beyond.

As the American Academy of Pediatrics succinctly stated in their guidance for school reentry, “It is also critical to maintain a balanced curriculum with continued physical education and other learning experiences rather than an exclusive emphasis on core subject areas.” As you can see, focusing on whole child education through health and physical education instruction really is more important for our students *now* than ever.

It’s time to prioritize health & physical education. The well-being of our students depends on it.