

Expert meeting on children and young people's health and well-being – Focused on physical activity within the school sector

Nordic – Baltic meeting in Gothenburg 13 May, 2025



Photo: Nadja Frederiksen

The primary aim of the meeting was to facilitate the exchange of experiences among Nordic and Baltic countries on improving the health and well-being of children and young people. Highlighting concerns over low physical activity levels and excessive sedentary behaviour, the meeting focused on enhancing health-promoting and preventive measures. Strategies and best practices that can strengthen policy development within the school sector, with the aim of promoting physical activity and equitable health were discussed.

The Swedish Public Health Agency and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare in collaboration with the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health hosted the expert meeting in Gothenburg, Sweden. The participants were representatives from Nordic and Baltic countries, including officials at government offices and state agencies responsible for education, schools, children's and youth's health, and physical activity. Furthermore, representatives from the Nordic network on physical activity, within the Nordic Welfare Centre participated and ran the group discussions. The welcoming remarks and opening speech were delivered by Anna Bessö, Deputy Director General for the Public Health Agency of Sweden, and Taru Koivisto, Deputy Director General at the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health."



Physical activity in schools - plays power learning

Dr Juana Willumsen from the World Health Organization in Geneva was invited to give an overview of the area. She highlighted the general health benefits with being physical active over the life course. And explicitly, that physical activity has a positive effect on mental health, cognitive health, and on learning outcomes. She presented the *Global action plan on physical activity* and WHO tools that can help countries in their work with enhancing physical activity in their population. The action plan sets out 4 strategic objectives achievable through 20 policy actions that are universally applicable to all countries, recognizing that each country is at a different starting point in their efforts to reduce levels of physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour. A whole systems approach is needed to increase physical activity, as **there is no single policy solution**. Important enablers for change are leadership, advocacy, and importantly monitoring and evaluation.

One of the policy action is applying the principles of the whole-of-school approach in all pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions, to establish and reinforce lifelong health and physical literacy, and promote the enjoyment of, and participation in, physical activity, according to capacity and ability. In promoting physical activity through schools, WHO emphasizes the importance of spreading knowledge about physical activity and that there is no inherent conflict between the school's academic requirements and the health development of children and adolescents. Rather, there are significant synergies and benefits to integrating physical activity throughout the entire school day. Efforts can be directed toward the time before and after the scheduled school day, as well as focused on incorporating physical activity into lessons and break activities. A call from Juana was to **talk about things that matter to children today—not about risk of non-communicable diseases later**.

Links to WHO publications: [The Global action plan on physical activity 2018-2030: more active people for a healthier world](#)

[Promoting physical activity through schools: Policy briefs](#)

[Promoting physical activity through schools: a toolkit](#)

[Promoting walking and cycling – a toolkit of policy options](#)

Examples from the Nordic countries

Finnish schools on the move, Päivi Aalto-Nevalainen, Ministry of education and culture, Finland

The [Finnish School on the Move programme](#) is a part of the government programmes. It is a research-based programme for promoting physical activity in schools. The objective of the programme is to increase physical activity among



school-age children by making the school culture more active in various ways. Linking research and monitoring with the implementation of the programme, the strong bottom-up ideology of the school-oriented approach and the extensive cooperation networks have been central success areas in the implementation of the programme. The programme has been developed in Finland since 2010 and has grown from a pilot of 45 schools into a project that covers more than 90 percent of Finnish schools in basic education. As a result, the school culture has become more physically active: a positive change has been observed in the organisation of activities and school premises, movement has been added to lessons and more attention has been paid to less active pupils.

School in motion, Mathias Brekke Mandelid, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway

In Norway, there is a focus on making schools more physically active to support learning, as highlighted in the White Paper – A more practical School: Better Learning, Motivation and Well-being in Grades 5-10. [Meld. St. 34 \(2023–2024\) - En mer praktisk skole](#). (White Paper No. 34 (2023–2024)). [Center for physically active learning \(SEFAL\)](#), established in 2018, has a dual aim of educating teachers in Physically Active Learning (PAL) competencies and to further develop a PAL pedagogy with teachers. SEFAL collaborates with schools to offer a program that targets whole-school involvement and links PAL to the ongoing professional growth of teachers' pedagogical practice. SEFAL has also collaborated with teachers to create the website [Faltastisk.no](#), a digital learning resource designed to inspire teachers to incorporate more physical activity in learning during the school day.

Health promoting schools, Ingibjörg Guðmundsdóttir, Directorate of Health, Iceland

The example from Iceland was about health promoting schools (with focus on compulsory schools for the children aged 6-15 years) in Iceland using a whole school approach. Through the website <https://www.heilsueflandi.is/> schools can see checklists of things they want to focus on throughout a school year according to their needs in the work of being a health promoting school. If they want to focus on mental health promotion a checklist for the work with that is available. Through the website the school draw base-line, then they prioritise – one check list is chosen to work with during the school year, and actions are chosen from the check list and progress is listed.



Summary of the discussions

Participants were divided into groups and the discussions were based on the following questions:

1. Which policy tools or decisions could be relevant at the national or regional level?
2. How can incentives to promote physical activity during the school day be strengthened? How can physical activity become more relevant and prioritized in decision-making processes?
3. What monitoring or follow-up is needed to ensure successful implementation in the school environment?

The central message was that a whole-school, cross-curricular approach to physical activity—supported by targeted training, practical resources, and clear evidence of benefits—can boost academic performance and mental wellbeing. Success hinges on strong governance and an adaptive school culture: explicit policies, committed leadership, secured funding, and protected time for implementation. Real momentum comes from involving students and all staff, measuring progress, and publicly sharing results to sustain engagement. The aim is to move beyond treating physical activity as a physical education (PE) -only activity and to weave movement into daily routines, subject teaching, and the broader school life. Broader messaging should emphasize benefits beyond academics, including mental health and resilience, and, at broader policy levels, argue that physical activity contributes to overall wellbeing and societal capabilities such as physical readiness.

Policy tools and decisions

Several practical observations stress a two-step approach—establish a coordinated, funded whole-school framework, then translate knowledge into concrete, scalable actions for all staff—while acknowledging barriers like time, funding, and the need for multiple coordinators, as well as cultural norms that may require national support to prioritize health over traditional behavior. Provide clear, actionable training materials and evidence about physical activity benefits for academics, cognitive function, and well-being. Emphasize “how to” more than just “why” to implement physical activity across the school day.

Implement regular formal evaluations to measure results and demonstrate impact. Publicize successful interventions and evidence of physical activity benefits (academic, cognitive, mental health) to build support and momentum. Focus on equity and safety. Prioritize activities for less active students to reduce disparities. Consider safety and security aspects when promoting physical activity within the school context.

Key actions fall into several interlocking strands.

1. **Training and capacity building:** Every teacher and staff member should understand physical activity’s importance and receive ongoing, user-friendly professional development with practical guidance on how to integrate movement into daily practice and curricula, while ensuring readiness for supportive routines like uniform policies and classroom movement breaks.
2. **Integration and curriculum:** Strengthen physical activity content in curricula; develop cross-curricular links so physical activity is embedded in multiple subjects. Develop and implement a formal physical activity strategy for schools, including measurable targets and evaluation.
3. **Policy and governance:** Physical activity must be prioritized within education policy and decision-making, backed by evidence of benefits to academics, cognition, and mental health, with formal evaluation at regular intervals and coordinated, multi-level funding and resource planning.
4. **Evidence, measurement, and visibility:** Share concrete results to build publicity and buy-in, using data to justify investment and to strengthen the evidence base through ongoing evaluation and research.
5. **Collaboration and stakeholder involvement:** Foster cross-sector collaboration with schools, communities, and government, involve students in planning and implementation, and ensure all staff contribute, not only physical education teachers.
6. **Resources, safety, and practicalities:** Secure sufficient materials, programs, and personnel, address safety concerns, and frame motives around wellbeing and performance as well as safety.

7. **Culture, day-to-day practice, and equity:** Foster a whole-school culture where physical activity is routine, balance educational needs with economic realities, and ensure inclusive access for less-active students.

Incentives to promote physical activity during the school day

A comprehensive approach to promoting physical activity requires layering actions across law, policy, curriculum, governance, and practical delivery. The core idea is to put physical activity explicitly into national laws or government programs—for example, mandating daily outdoor time and prioritizing physical activity during recess, with environments such as playgrounds and green spaces aligned to these aims. Estonia illustrates this by mandating outdoor time for all age groups and requiring staff to prioritize physical activity during recess, while ensuring that the built and natural environment supports these aims. Denmark represents another reference point, where current legal and regulatory frameworks are acknowledged and there is consideration of new guidelines to further embed physical activity into policy.

The policy should embed physical activity goals within the curriculum and secure alignment with educational authorities, making physical activity an integral element of daily learning rather than confined to physical education classes. This includes developing educational tools and resources for teachers to implement physical activity across school subjects. Intersectoral and governance arrangements are essential, calling for cooperation among health, education, urban planning, and local governments, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities at the local level. Co-creation should be evidence-based and connected to the school curriculum, with political buy-in to sustain momentum.

Implementation requires practical steps, accountable processes, and metrics, supported by resources and an evidence-based approach that integrates health and learning policy areas. Investment in infrastructure—outdoor spaces, green areas, and safe, playable environments—is crucial, with guidelines for architecture and outdoor areas emerging (as in Norway's 2025 planning). Economic incentives should accompany policy adoption, and NGOs should be engaged as partners to deliver and sustain physical activity initiatives. A national long-term plan is needed to sustain efforts across regions, ensuring ongoing political involvement and thoughtful integration of political support.

Cross-cutting actions emphasize combining health and learning policies in a systematic, co-created framework aligned with the curriculum and with legislative and policy actions that guarantee outdoor activity, safe spaces, and active teaching. Specific items include extending active play and active recess in law, ensuring daily outdoor time across age groups, training staff to focus on active play during recess, and designing environments that support physical activity during recess and for active teaching outside the classroom.

Monitoring and follow-up

A comprehensive approach to monitoring and follow-up in schools emphasizes establishing national surveillance of physical activity using evidence-based, comparable measures and reliable implementation tools, supported by a detailed national plan that specifies timing, responsible actors, funding, and reporting requirements. Practical tools include checklists and standardized questions to assess each school's status, along with reliable measures of intervention outcomes such as accelerometers and validated surveys, with baseline data and ongoing results tracked, and an explicit inclusion of academic performance alongside physical activity outcomes. The measurement scope should cover physical fitness/physical capacities, activity during core times (including travel to and from school), and accumulated physical activity, while also monitoring wellbeing, mental health, learning, readiness, social life, and student relations, recognizing a broad array of indicators and considering longitudinal studies to capture changes over time. Responsibility should shift from a sole physical education-teacher task to a whole-school approach that engages principals and all staff through a collaborative governance model for data collection, reporting, and the use of findings, with findings nationally represented through regular school reporting. Data use and follow-up should differentiate which activities and programs work, guiding where to start and how to intervene by examining cumulative activity and appropriate entry points, and ensuring that data collection and sharing feed back into policy decisions and funding decisions.

Implementation challenges to navigate include limited time, which calls for integrating monitoring into routine school processes; careful indicator selection to balance health, wellbeing, learning, readiness, social factors, and relations while aligning with national goals; and the need for policy and funding decisions that enable standard questions, adequate time, and cross-school collaboration. Practical next steps involve developing standardized monitoring questions and a core set of indicators for all schools, crafting a national plan that outlines measurement timelines, analysis and reporting responsibilities, and data sharing methods, providing training and resources for all staff to participate in monitoring and data use, piloting and refining the approach to ensure accelerometer and survey data are feasible and informative at scale, and establishing mechanisms for ongoing reporting and national-level data use to drive continuous improvement.

Embedding physical activity as a fundamental component of education requires a deliberate, coordinated, and well-resourced system-wide approach. By fostering a whole-school culture, ensuring leadership commitment, equipping teachers, integrating physical activity into curricula, coordinating across levels, and actively engaging stakeholders, the education system can achieve meaningful improvements in health, wellbeing, and academic outcomes. Regular evaluation, transparent reporting, and alignment with policy will sustain momentum and ensure that all students have equitable access to movement opportunities that support their learning and long-term success.



Take home messages

- Emphasize physical activity's impact on academic achievement and cognitive function in decision-making. Consider broader societal framing (mental health, wellbeing) and its connection to academic outcomes. Align with policy instruments and law of education to elevate physical activity as a formal priority.
- Implement a whole-school physical activity plan with clear roles and responsibilities. Provide comprehensive training and resources for all teachers. Integrate physical activity into multiple subjects and everyday routines, not just recess or physical education. Build a robust evaluation system to track progress and share results publicly. Secure consistent funding and time allocation, with cross-level coordination (local to national).
- Develop a communication strategy to convey the benefits of physical activity to students, families, and communities, reinforcing the rationale for cross-curricular movement and policy commitments.
- We need to collaborate more in the Nordic/Baltic region and learn from each other.
- Engage in relevant networks on physical activity, such as the HEPA network (WHO), HEPA Europe network [HEPA Europe \(European network for the promotion of health-enhancing physical activity\)](#) and the Nordic network on physical activity (NWC) [Nordic network for physical activity | NVC](#)

Attachment 1. - List of participants

Representatives from Nordic and Baltic countries, including officials at government offices and state agencies responsible for education, schools, children's and youth's health, and physical activity. Representatives from the Nordic network on physical activity, within the Nordic Welfare centre. The following organisations were represented:

Organisation	Country
Danish Health Authority	Denmark
Competence Centre for Physical Activity	Estonia
National Institute of Health Development	Estonia
Ministry of Education and Research	Estonia
Ministry of Culture	Estonia
Faroeese Health Authority	Faroe Islands
Nordic Welfare Centre	Finland
Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare	Finland
Ministry of Education and Culture	Finland
UKK Institute	Finland
Reykjavik University	Iceland
The Directorate of Health	Iceland
Ministry of Health	Lithuania
Lithuanian non-formal education agency	Lithuania
Ministry of Education, Science and Sport	Lithuania
Institute of Hygiene	Lithuania
Western Norway University of Applied Sciences	Norway
Norwegian Directorate of Health	Norway
Public Health Agency	Sweden
Swedish National Agency for Education	Sweden
The Government of Åland	Åland Islands