

## Re-imagining the Purpose of School Sport

As a provincial subject association for Health and Physical Education (H&PE), Ophea envisions an Ontario where school-based sport and physical activity opportunities empower every student to enjoy the benefits of healthy, active living. Working with students to understand and dismantle participation barriers and providing a range of school sport programming that reflects student interests, abilities, and lived experiences are crucial steps in expanding access to affirming physical activity opportunities that centre joy, connection, and feelings of belonging.

In an economic landscape that prevents many families from pursuing organized extracurricular sport, schools offer an avenue for low- to no-cost programming promoting the myriad physical and mental health benefits of sport and physical activity for every student. Offering both interschool and intramural options ostensibly allows students to choose a level of competition that appeals to them; however, students report that the overwhelming focus of current school sport opportunities is elite performance. When the bulk of school sport programming is tailored to a small minority of student athletes and those seeking high levels of competition, other students are discouraged from participating, perpetuating harmful assumptions about who enjoys and excels at physical activity and whom it is for.

Students experiencing identity-based marginalization such as racism, ableism, transphobia, and/or homophobia face additional barriers to participation in school sport (Gumprich & Hare, 2023; Jumpstart Charities, 2024). Among these barriers are a lack of culturally appropriate opportunities, programming that fails to acknowledge (and at times outright denies) student's identities, and harmful misconceptions and assumptions about student interests or abilities. School sport providers at every level must be equipped with tools to proactively address forms of oppression as they manifest and must be willing to consider how their own biases and experiences may impact their practices.

Ultimately, students desire school sport and physical activity opportunities that foster fun, connection with their peers, inclusive participation, and a joy of movement (Jumpstart Charities, 2024). School sport can be a beacon of feelings of belonging at school where we move past limiting understandings of competition, often rooted in harmful and oppressive ideologies, and seek connection. As we re-imagine the purpose of school sport, Ophea reaffirms that every student deserves opportunities for sport and physical activity where they feel they belong.

---

This statement was developed in collaboration with various interest holders, subject matter experts, and community partners.

## **Bibliography**

Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities. (2024). Jumpstart State of Play Youth Report, <https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0122/8124/9892/files/State-of-Play-2024-EN.pdf?v=1713368242>

Gumprich, M., & Hare, N. (2023) The Canadian Non-binary Youth in Sport Report. <https://ankorstransconnect.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/non-binary-youth-in-sport-report.pdf>