

**School sports in public education systems:
A global review of implementation and resource constraints**

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ABSTRACT

Although aspects of student well-being, social development, and educational enrichment are popularly associated with school sports, the constantly changing recognition and the lack of institutional support frequently derail the position of school sports within public education systems. Sporadic implementation and underdeveloped maintenance structures are continually experienced by school sports initiatives across many countries, instead of embedding them as key elements of holistic education. Not only does the absence of policy attention reflect these conditions, but also the difficulty of putting broad educational ideals into operational practice. This article examines global patterns of school sports implementation by interrogating the public school management systems that shape decision-making and execution, with particular attention to human resource management, financial and material administration, curriculum and instruction, and community engagement. The study draws together international policy texts, cross-national education analyses, and empirical investigations to reveal how administrative arrangements and resource governance determine the delivery of school sports programs using a qualitative-integrative review approach. The analysis indicates that policy intentions are often articulated with clarity, yet their realization is frequently diminished by fragmented management dynamics, limited professional preparation, peripheral placement of sports within curricula, and inconsistent external support. While resource shortages are commonly cited as the primary obstacle, the findings suggest that such limitations are better understood as consequences of systemic management choices rather than as purely technical deficiencies. By reframing implementation gaps as indicators of structural misalignment, the study offers a management-centered framework capable of accounting for differences in school sports provision across contexts. This perspective emphasizes that the varying outcomes do not stem from contextual probability but from the degree to which management systems fail or succeed in setting priorities. The article ultimately demonstrates that the persistence of inequitable school sports programs reflects weaknesses in system coherence, and that sustainable provision becomes attainable only when human, financial, curricular, and community elements are deliberately integrated within and around educational goals. Implications are outlined for policymakers, school leaders, and educators, alongside directions for future studies that seek strengthened governance capacity and institutional coordination in public school sports systems.

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.69651/PIJHSS05031441>

Recommended citation:

Sala, M. R., & Galigao, R. P. (2026). School sports in public education systems: A global review of implementation and resource constraints. *Pantao (International Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences)* 5 (3), 2973-2982. <http://doi.org/10.69651/PIJHSS05031441>

Keywords: Public school management, school sports, co-curricular programs, resource constraints, human resource management, curriculum implementation.

Date Submitted: July 10, 2026

Date Accepted: July 15, 2026

Date Published: August 10, 2026

INTRODUCTION

School sports and co-curricular programs occupy a complex and contested position within public education systems. Although widely acknowledged as important contributors to students' physical health, social development, character formation, and holistic growth, these programs are frequently regarded as secondary compared with academically assessed subjects. This marginal positioning is particularly evident in public school systems where limited resources, competing policy priorities, and accountability pressures influence institutional decision making. Consequently, the implementation of school sports varies considerably across and within countries, raising critical concerns regarding equity, effectiveness, sustainability, and governance. While public education systems are expected to provide inclusive and high-quality learning opportunities that address diverse learner abilities, interests, and developmental needs despite resource limitations, school sports often remain operationally under supported. Many educational policies articulate commitments toward student wellbeing and holistic development; however, these aspirations are frequently unsupported by the managerial structures, financial investments, and institutional mechanisms necessary for sustained implementation. The persistent gap between policy vision and actual practice suggests that the challenges confronting school sports are not merely logistical concerns but are deeply connected to the ways public schools are governed, managed, and resourced.

Existing scholarship on school sports has largely emphasized outcomes associated with participation, including physical health improvement, academic enhancement, social development, and psychosocial benefits. Although this body of literature establishes the educational value of sports engagement, it often provides limited examination of the management systems that enable, constrain, or sustain program implementation. Conversely, research on public school management has traditionally prioritized instructional quality, academic achievement, and accountability measures, resulting in comparatively limited attention to co-curricular domains such as sports. This separation has created a significant gap in understanding how school sports operations intersect with broader public school management systems and resource governance. Addressing this gap requires viewing school sports not simply as extracurricular activities but as management dependent educational functions shaped by institutional decisions, organizational structures, and resource allocation processes.

This article examines school sports as a management dependent educational function by advancing the perspective that effective implementation depends on the interaction of four interconnected management domains: human resource management, financial and resource management, curriculum and instruction, and community engagement. Through an analysis of how public school management systems facilitate or constrain the delivery of school sports and co-curricular programs under different resource conditions, the study seeks to identify global patterns in school sports implementation, examine how management related factors influence opportunities and limitations, and propose an integrative framework that can support more coherent policies and practices. By connecting educational management perspectives with the realities of sports implementation, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how public education systems can strengthen equitable and sustainable school sports provision.

Public school management systems provide the structural foundation through which school sports programs are organized, supervised, and sustained. These systems determine how authority is distributed, how resources are assigned, and how institutional priorities are established across national, regional, and school levels. The manner in which decision-making power is organized influences policy interpretation, implementation consistency, and the extent to which sports programs receive institutional recognition. Public school management systems encompass the structures, processes, and practices used to administer schools, allocate resources, and maintain accountability (OECD, 2017). These include governance arrangements, personnel management, financial administration, and stakeholder coordination mechanisms (Hooge et al., 2012). In centralized education systems, policy authority and funding decisions are commonly concentrated at higher levels of government, whereas decentralized systems provide greater autonomy to local authorities and individual schools (OECD, 2017; Hooge et al., 2012). These contrasting arrangements shape the degree of flexibility, responsiveness, and consistency in implementing school sports initiatives.

Research indicates that management systems influence not only instructional quality but also the sustainability of non-academic programs (Fullan, 2016). Leadership decisions regarding resource allocation are often shaped by accountability mechanisms that prioritize measurable academic performance outcomes (OECD, 2017). As a result, programs outside traditional academic domains, including school sports, may receive reduced institutional support despite their recognized contributions to student development (Fullan, 2016). Effective implementation therefore depends on governance structures that establish clear priorities, coordinate responsibilities, and align institutional resources with educational objectives (Hooge et al., 2012). Comparative patterns across continents demonstrate that regions with stronger integration between education governance and sports structures tend to achieve more consistent outcomes. Europe generally demonstrates high levels of perceived success through integrated physical education systems and partnerships with sports clubs, while Asia shows high achievement in structured systems through centralized sports education integration. North America reflects strong participation through decentralized district and state leagues, and Oceania benefits from national physical education standards and community sports connections. In contrast, Latin America experiences uneven implementation due to mixed management systems and resource gaps, while Africa continues to develop foundational competitive structures. These patterns indicate that school sports effectiveness is closely associated with the coherence, prioritization, and coordination of public school management structures. Strengthening institutional alignment is therefore essential for improving implementation outcomes.

Human resource management represents another critical determinant of school sports quality and continuity. The effectiveness of school sports programs depends greatly on staffing structures, professional preparation, role allocation, and ongoing support mechanisms. Human resource management influences who deliver programs, how responsibilities are distributed, and whether personnel possess the necessary competencies to provide meaningful sports experiences for students. In public schools, human resource management includes teacher recruitment, staff deployment, workload distribution, professional development, and performance evaluation processes (UNESCO, 2015). Physical education teachers are frequently assigned responsibility for managing sports activities in addition to their regular instructional duties, often without additional compensation, specialized training, or sufficient institutional support (OECD, 2017). These conditions affect the sustainability and quality of program delivery.

Studies reveal that schools experience significant challenges in maintaining consistent sports programs when human resource systems undervalue physical education expertise and sports related competencies (Hardman, 2011). Limited access to qualified coaches, insufficient safety preparation, and high personnel turnover weaken program quality and restrict opportunities for students (UNESCO, 2015). These challenges are not merely individual limitations but reflect broader institutional decisions regarding staffing priorities, professional development, and talent management (OECD, 2017). Comparative evidence suggests that successful school sports systems are often supported by deliberate workforce development strategies. Europe demonstrates strong outcomes through certified physical education teachers, structured coach development, and partnerships with sports organizations. Asia benefits from centralized policies, talent identification systems, and unified training structures, while North America emphasizes teacher coach preparation and volunteer development. Oceania integrates national qualifications with community sports networks, whereas Latin America and Africa continue to face limitations related to coach training, staffing capacity, and infrastructure. These patterns emphasize that clearly defined roles, adequate staffing, and sustained professional support are necessary conditions for long term program viability.

Financial and resource management also significantly shapes the accessibility, quality, and sustainability of school sports programs. Budget allocation, facility availability, equipment provision, and maintenance systems determine whether schools can provide meaningful opportunities for student participation. Financial and resource management refers to the processes through which public schools acquire, distribute, and oversee material and financial inputs necessary for educational operations (OECD, 2017). School sports programs are particularly vulnerable to budget constraints, especially in under resourced education systems where resources are frequently directed toward academic priorities (Coakley, 2015). Facilities maintenance, equipment acquisition, transportation for competitions, and operational costs require continuous investment, yet these expenditures are often considered discretionary rather than essential components of education provision (UNESCO, 2015; OECD, 2017).

Comparative research demonstrates that unequal resource management practices contribute to disparities in access and participation opportunities (Coakley, 2015). Schools located in economically advantaged communities often supplement public funding through parental contributions, private partnerships, and community support, while disadvantaged schools rely primarily on limited public allocations (OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2015). This condition raises important concerns regarding whether public education systems reduce social inequalities or unintentionally reinforce them through unequal access to sports opportunities (Coakley, 2015). Across regions, Europe demonstrates strong school sports outcomes through stable public budgets, effective governance, and adequate facilities. Asia benefits from structured funding systems and community support, although resource gaps remain. North America reflects moderate to high success through significant investment, though distribution varies across regions. Oceania maintains participation through national frameworks but remains dependent on facility and coaching resources. Latin America and Africa continue to experience challenges related to inconsistent funding, infrastructure limitations, and restricted access. These findings indicate that sustainable school sports programs require dependable, equitable, and strategically managed resources.

Curriculum and instructional positioning further determine the status and visibility of school sports within educational systems. The extent to which sports are integrated into formal curricula influences instructional time allocation, institutional recognition, and perceptions of educational value. Within public schools, curricular positioning determines whether sports are treated as essential components of student development or as optional activities outside the primary educational mission. When physical education and sports receive protected instructional time, clear accountability mechanisms, and intentional curricular integration, they

are less vulnerable to marginalization within school structures (UNESCO, 2015; Hardman, 2011). Conversely, when curricula become increasingly saturated and assessment systems emphasize academic performance, opportunities for physical activity are frequently reduced (Hardman, 2011; OECD, 2017).

Curriculum decisions therefore function as management variables that regulate student access to school sports programs. The status assigned to sports within educational frameworks reflects broader institutional beliefs regarding holistic development and student wellbeing (UNESCO, 2015). Comparative patterns reveal that Europe maintains high success through compulsory, protected, and skill progressive physical education structures. Asia demonstrates strong performance oriented and state prioritized systems, while North America maintains high participation through curricular physical education combined with extracurricular sports structures. Oceania emphasizes physical education as a core learning area with inclusive objectives. Meanwhile, Latin America and Africa continue to face challenges due to limited instructional time and weaker curricular implementation. These differences highlight that elevating the curricular standing of school sports is essential for maintaining program continuity, educational legitimacy, and long-term stability.

Community engagement and external support represent additional factors influencing the implementation of school sports programs. Relationships among schools, families, local governments, community organizations, and civil society groups can provide valuable resources, expertise, and participation opportunities. Community engagement refers to partnerships among educational institutions and external stakeholders that contribute to student development and school improvement (Epstein, 2018). In many contexts, community partnerships provide essential assistance through financial support, facility access, volunteer coaching, and organizational expertise (UNESCO, 2015). However, strong dependence on external support may also contribute to uneven implementation and unequal access among schools with different levels of community capacity (OECD, 2017).

Research suggests that community involvement can strengthen sustainability when partnerships are strategically aligned with institutional goals (Epstein, 2018). Nevertheless, excessive reliance on external actors may shift responsibility away from public education systems and create concerns regarding whether school sports should depend on community contributions or be guaranteed through consistent public provision (UNESCO, 2015; OECD, 2017). Regional patterns indicate that Europe benefits from strong school, municipal, and sports club partnerships, while Asia demonstrates state led and institutional support structures. North America reflects significant parental, community, and private involvement, and Oceania integrates community sports organizations with public agencies. Latin America experiences more inconsistent partnerships, while Africa often relies on non-governmental organizations and donor support. These findings suggest that external partnerships are most effective when embedded within clear institutional frameworks that promote equitable access. A balanced relationship between public responsibility and community participation is therefore necessary for sustainable school sports development.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that school sports implementation is shaped by interconnected management systems rather than isolated program decisions. Governance structures determine institutional priorities, human resource systems influence implementation capacity, financial management determines access and sustainability, curriculum positioning establishes educational legitimacy, and community engagement provides additional support while requiring careful coordination. Although existing studies have documented the benefits of sports participation and examined various aspects of educational management separately, limited research has integrated these dimensions into a unified framework explaining how

public school management systems influence school sports implementation across diverse contexts. Addressing this gap is essential for developing policies and practices that recognize school sports as a meaningful component of holistic education rather than a peripheral activity. Through an integrated examination of management structures, resource governance, and stakeholder relationships, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how public education systems can create equitable, sustainable, and effective school sports programs.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative integrative review methodology to combine varied bodies of literature and develop analytical insights, as the analysis of complex and multi-dimensional topics such as school sports implementation very well suits with integrative review. This design allowed empirical evidence, theoretical discussions, and policy analyses to be assessed alongside a single analytical framework.

The sources for this review were drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals, international policy documents, and comparative education studies published over the past two decades. Literatures relevant to public education systems, school sports or co-curricular programs, and issues related to management and resource allocation were included and emphasized in this study. A global perspective was adopted, and selected examples were used to illustrate significant ideas rather than providing a wide-ranging account of all related studies.

The analysis was framed around four secondary variables: human resource management, financial and resource management, curriculum and instruction, and community engagement. In order to explore how these variables interact within different public school management systems, data were analyzed using thematic coding. This approach allowed patterns and relationships to emerge across diverse contexts and governance structures.

Since this is a review-based study, human participants were not involved in this study. In addition, transparent sourcing, analytical interpretation, and clear acknowledgment of illustrative references were utilized to make sure ethical standards were maintained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Public school management and implementation patterns

Divergence in management structures and inter-organizational collaboration influence patterns of program implementation across contexts. Sports programs are shaped with policy intentions that are operationalized through administrative mechanisms, while institutional accountability and communication networks also often lead to uneven execution. Implementation patterns, therefore reflect deeper governance dynamics.

The findings indicate that the extent to which school sports are put into practice largely hinges on how well management elements work together, such that when policies, funding, and accountability systems are coordinated and aligned, sports programs are delivered in a more consistent and dependable manner (OECD, 2018). On the other hand, implementation demonstrates uneven adherence, despite existence of policy to provide strong support, when management systems are fragmented and uncoordinated (Vega-Ramírez et al., 2023), not only will result to uneven quality of program delivery, student-participation opportunities, and learner development outcomes but will also undermine the overall goal of school sports programs.

The nature of implementation reflect overarching governance dynamics reinforcing the need for harmonized and well-integrated management systems. Where coordination is weak,

program delivery becomes inconsistent. Strengthening systemic alignment can reduce variability in implementation outcomes.

Human resource constraints and professional capacity

The limitations in staffing, training, and professional development affect the quality and consistency of school sports delivery leading to inadequate numbers of qualified personnel and disparities in access to professional development. Program capacity is further weakened with limited opportunities for professional mobility and collaboration. These factors collectively shape workforce effectiveness.

Human resource management (HRM) challenges hinder the effective implementation of school sports programs, that the program quality is affected by insufficient staffing, limited opportunities for professional development, and the low institutional recognition of sports-related roles (Hardman & Green, 2017). Rather than being merely isolated personnel shortages, these barriers reflect broader management and policy priorities (Vega-Ramírez et al., 2023), if public school sports programs insist on consistently acting on its written mandate.

Persistent workplace limitations highlight the importance of long-term investment in professional capacity to ensure consistent and high-quality program delivery. Without sustained support, staffing gaps are likely to persist. Strategic workforce planning is therefore central to system improvement.

Financial and material resource limitations

The issues and concern on funding, infrastructure gaps, and equipment limitations shake the program coverage and impact. Disparities are considered between schools and regions in access to essential facilities. The scope and safety of sports participation are directly dependent on material conditions. Resource limitations, thus have both operational and equity implications.

The quality of infrastructure, availability of equipment, and continuity of school sports programs are significantly influenced by financial constraints suggesting that unstable or unpredictable funding, rather than an absolute shortage of resources, is often the main factor that compromises program execution (Coakley & Pike, 2019). Short-term or one-off grants are inadequate for sustained, long-term planning (OECD, 2018), reason why it is almost impossible for any public school sports program to achieve its goal.

Resource disparities continue to create uneven program experiences, reinforcing the central role of equitable funding and infrastructure provision. Where material conditions are inadequate, participation opportunities decline. Addressing these gaps is critical for broadening access.

Curriculum marginalization of school sports

Putting school sports at the sidelines within academic priorities presents implications for time allocation, status, and program continuity, while academic performance pressures often shift to prioritization of assessed subjects and as a consequence, sports programs may receive reduced institutional emphasis. Low-priority positioning of sports programs in the curriculum affects both perception and application.

The placement of sports within the curriculum has a major impact on students' access, that when sports are not formally incorporated into the school program, they tend to be

deprioritized during periods of academic pressures (Hardman & Green, 2017), highlighting that curriculum design is not just instructional but also a key aspect of school management (OECD, 2018) where every learner is nurtured based on his/her dominant multiple intelligence/s.

Curricular sidelining weakens program continuity and stability emphasizing the need for stronger institutional recognition of school sports' educational contributions. Without formal prioritization, school sports are at a risk of being reduced. Reconceptualizing school sports as integral to holistic education is therefore imperative.

Community engagement: Opportunity and risk

This section evaluates community involvement as both a source of support and a potential driver of inequities when reliance on external resources becomes uneven. Community actors can expand opportunities beyond what schools alone can provide. However, differing local capacities lead to unequal benefits. This dual role complicates the concern on equity.

Community engagement can improve the delivery of school sports programs, but it may also increase disparities, such that schools with well-established community networks often gain greater benefits, highlighting potential fairness issues in decentralized support systems (Epstein, 2018; OECD, 2018), where teacher-coaches and student-athletes in less-privileged communities face more difficult hurdles in executing the sports programs.

Community involvement remains a double-edged factor, offering valuable support while also risking inequities when public provision is insufficient. Substance models require clear public responsibility alongside community collaboration. Equity considerations must remain central in partnership design.

CONCLUSION

This global review demonstrates that the implementation of school sports in public education is fundamentally a question of effective management rather than a matter of isolated technical adjustments. Limitations in resources, far from being merely operational obstacles, serve as indicators that reveal how schools are organized, staffed, funded, and connected to their surrounding communities. By situating school sports within the broader structure of public school management frameworks, this study offers an integrative perspective that departs from outcome-focused analyses alone, providing a more comprehensive understanding of program results by tracing the connections across governance, resources, and curricular positioning. This analysis demonstrates that structural and operational dimensions are inherently linked, and these insights offer valuable evidence to inform broader deliberations on public education reform, particularly with respect to policy design, system-level coordination, and the pursuit of equitable program development.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce a systems-based view of co-curricular education. In practical terms, this perspective underscores the necessity for policymakers to implement concrete and actionable support, ensuring that school sports are structurally embedded within management practices and accountability mechanisms rather than treated as peripheral activities. The evidence further indicates that for school sports systems to function effectively, support mechanisms must be anchored in coordinated governance; where governance is inconsistent, financial support inadequate, and institutional commitment superficial, program outcomes are correspondingly compromised. Consequently, achieving equitable outcomes remains a persistent challenge in contexts marked by fragmented efforts, suggesting that systemic and long-term approaches, rather than isolated interventions, are required to address these structural gaps.

In light of these findings, future research should address the notable dearth of studies on the implementation of school sports by pursuing continued investigation across diverse continents, with particular attention to comparative and multi-level studies. Greater emphasis should be placed on under-represented contexts and regions in order to further explore the structural impediments that shape program delivery in these settings. Future studies should also empirically test the relationships between management variables and outcomes across varying contexts, including student-athletes, coaches, training programs, national policies, and the structures of implementation and support, given that these factors interact to produce differing results. Longitudinal considerations should likewise be incorporated as a feature of future studies, such as examining reformed human resource management and school program funding models within broader social networks. In addition, further qualitative research is needed to gain deeper insight into the experiences of students and teachers in under-resourced public schools. Taken together, these directions suggest that future studies should adopt multi-level and comparative approaches in order to more fully understand how governance, capacity, and equity interact to shape the implementation of school sports.

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