

# Back to School: The Push for Pickleball in P.E.

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by Kelly Campbell

September marks the end of summer vacation, and kids are returning to school. This means it's time for students to hit the books and focus on homework, but also to play with their peers in many kids' favorite subject – gym class.

We all remember going to P.E. class and shuffling through the units and gym games — volleyball, soccer, football, dodgeball, basketball, softball/baseball, and other popular sports. Gym class was a time to get together with peers, get

a fun workout in, and learn the fundamentals of various sports to encourage lifelong physical activity. The traditional physical education (phys-ed or P.E.) curriculum has shaped young athletes and our country's sports landscape into what it is today, but it has evolved over time; even sports like ultimate frisbee and pickleball are now P.E. staples.

More and more schools are adding pickleball to the mix. As the sport climbs in popularity, phys-ed programs create opportunities for young people to learn about pickleball in schools. This is huge for pickleball prosperity and implementation across all ages, which has been an overall obstacle for the sport since its inception.

Despite some demographic shifts over the past few years, pickleball carries the reputation of being a sport for older generations. USA Pickleball reports that of the 4.8 million pickleball players in the US, only 21.2% are ages 6-17. Even though pickleball popularity is highest among older people, its kid-friendly nature is sure to lead to more age groups getting involved. In fact, pickleball growth from 2020 to 2021 was the fastest among players under 24 years old, so the demand for youth pickleball is huge.

We've already seen some great strides for youth pickleball outside of school. Pickleball is now an [official sport in the Special Olympics USA Games](#), and [NBC Nightly News: Kids Edition](#) even did a feature on pickleball this past June. There

have also been a growing number of youth pickleball camps and programs over the past few years put on by local pickleball clubs and facilities. Introducing pickleball to schools is a monumental step that could finally make pickleball a core sport in the US.

In addition to being a fun break from academics, built-in pickleball education is a great investment in our future pickleball leaders. Read on to learn about pickleball's current place in schools, why it is a beneficial addition to P.E. curriculum, and what P.E. pickleball means for the pickleball community as a whole.

## **Pickleball's Current Place in Physical Education**

We still have a long way to go before pickleball is unanimously incorporated into K-12 education, but we've come a long way. Many schools have put pickleball in the rotation of their sports units.

While pickleball began dinking its way into gym classes pre-COVID, the pandemic played a huge role in schools adopting pickleball into their curriculum. When the pandemic hit, many sports became off-limits due to shared equipment and player contact. Luckily, pickleball could follow COVID-safety protocols, allowed for social distancing, and could be played outside. Since then, pickleball has remained a staple in gym classes across the country.

Most of us in the pickleball community focus on basic pickleball components like competition, exercise, and fun while playing, but P.E. teachers need to dig deeper. They also focus on pickleball mechanics and the sport's contribution to childhood development. P.E. curriculum often highlights the history of a sport, its health benefits, official rules, motor skills and movement patterns, strategies and tactics, and ethics and sportsmanship. They need to ensure that students take away the overall value of health, enjoyment, challenge, and self-expression from a sport. Pickleball specifically develops kids' hand-eye coordination, cardiovascular endurance, and target accuracy. Pickleball also improves motor skills and control while encouraging healthy competition and social interaction. [Wolf Sports](#) and [Gopher](#) even listed pickleball in their rankings of best overall P.E. games.



*Pictured: TrackitHub at Pickleball Incubator's pickleball event for all Phoenix schools (2021)*

## **Why should pickleball be taught at school?**

The CDC recommends that schools implement daily, structured, enjoyable physical education to promote lifelong physical activity and sportsmanship. This helps kids develop positive behavioral skills, motor skills, and confidence. Pickleball fits the mold perfectly – it's safe, easy to learn, fun, and cheap to incorporate, especially for schools looking to stay on budget.

Physical education goes a step beyond just playing a sport and gym games — there are often additional resources to ensure that kids understand the fundamentals of the sport. In addition to pickleball drills and matches, students might expect to have off-the-court pickleball lessons and pickleball worksheets. This creates well-rounded and versed players at an early age and sets kids up to thrive within the pickleball community.

P.E. curriculum places an emphasis on introducing kids to lifelong sports, or sports that are low-impact and can be played at older ages to combat the common post-adolescent decline in physical activity. Pickleball is a great lifelong sport to introduce. The equipment is lightweight, the intensity is customizable and there is little risk for injury. Pickleball is also already popular among older generations and in retirement communities, so opportunities to play will only continue to grow with age.

Pickleball is easy for teachers to incorporate into physical education because of its simplicity. The rules are easy for P.E. teachers to learn themselves and reteach to kids. Younger kids will be able to follow along and learn the basics, while older kids can turn up the intensity for competitive play.

Public schools tend to be on tight budgets, and sports equipment can get really expensive. Luckily, because

pickleball is cost-effective, nearly any school district with any budget can afford to implement it. Besides expensive handheld equipment, other sports also require costly courts and field maintenance. With pickleball, there are no hoops, goals, or plates to purchase – and the cost is customizable. While you *can* get fancy with permanent courts, a school can also get kids started with taped or chalk lines and temporary nets on preexisting courts and spaces.

Pickleball can also be played indoors or outdoors, which makes it an easy addition at any time of year. Kids can play rain or shine, and if teachers are limited by seasonal changes for other sports, pickleball can be played conveniently year-round.

Another plus – you don't need a team to play. With pickleball 1:1 matches, no one will feel left out by getting chosen last like in other sports. Kids can also play doubles with their friends to improve their teamwork skills.

## **What does pickleball's place in physical education mean for the growth of pickleball?**

Incorporating structured pickleball units in K-12 education could lead to the largest pickleball growth pattern we've ever seen. Pickleball education in schools increases the likelihood that pickleball becomes a core sport on par with others like football, baseball, and basketball.

Pickleball in schools not only ensures that all kids are exposed to pickleball in general, but it also primes our future pickleball leaders to increase the overall intensity and competition in the sport. School education provides the opportunity to learn pickleball rules and skills at an earlier age than we've ever seen, which will lead to kids wanting to become both casual and professional players.

Exposure to pickleball during the school day also has the potential to foster extracurricular pickleball. Pickleball after-school clubs could lead to more organized extracurricular play, like pickleball little leagues. Increased pickleball education and interest in academia might also open the door for pickleball to become a varsity sport.

Investing in youth pickleball is crucial if we want to continue to see big strides and growth in the pickleball community. Promoting K-12 pickleball education is one of the smartest ways to ensure pickleball prosperity for years to come.

## **Sources:**

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00046823.htm>

[https://openphysed.org/curriculum\\_resources/ms-pickleball](https://openphysed.org/curriculum_resources/ms-pickleball)

[More Schools Playing Pickleball During Coronavirus Pandemic](#)