

# Implementation Path and Experience Enlightenment of Collaborative Governance of Early Childhood Physical Education in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

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## Abstract

Early childhood education is the initial stage of comprehensive development of individuals. The essential difference between it and compulsory education lies in the dominance of emotional aesthetics and moral ethics, while physical education, as a means of bodily practice, can precisely refine children through external challenges and internal character breakthroughs, leading them towards the dimensions of aesthetics and morality. The early childhood physical education in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, has established a governance mechanism of “three cores, one auxiliary, and two synergies”, which integrates collaborative governance theory. It aims to promote the physical and mental health of young children, is based on the foundation of “Sports Clubs—Recognized Movement Kindergartens—Families”, and is driven by the partnership between clubs and kindergartens, combining autonomy and support. Drawing from the German experience, the governance of early childhood physical education in China needs to build consensus on child-friendly society, guide various social forces to participate, and balance Chinese characteristics with a global perspective in order to promote the return of the concept of “Complete Personality, Sports First” in the field of early childhood education in China, as well as the practical application of collaborative governance in the field of early childhood physical education.

## Keywords

Early Childhood Physical Education, Collaborative Governance, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

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## 1. Introduction

The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China

pointed out that China should continue to make efforts in “providing nurture for the young”, so that high-quality childcare services can benefit ordinary people and achieve common prosperity. A significant amount of research has been conducted in academia around the topic of early childhood education. The research achievements in developmental psychology have profoundly explained the foundational position of education for infants and young children in the comprehensive development of individuals. The characteristics of the fuzzy curriculum boundaries, the developing rational cognition of young children, etc., have made physical education stand out as an important part of early childhood education. However, influenced by the values of the professional education system and the accelerating erosion of modern division of labor, from curriculum system to teacher allocation, China’s early childhood education is tending to fall into the dilemma of becoming a “preparation for primary school”: a model of formalized education characterized by overdrawn learning content and utilitarian evaluation concepts not only forces students to tirelessly enrich their “resume”, but also undermines the most valuable “innovative vitality” in “sustainable infancy”. Faced with the above dilemma, how to effectively promote the high-quality return of physical education in the early childhood education stage has become a key challenge that needs to be addressed in the governance of early childhood physical education in China in the current and the future.

In Germany, early childhood education not only focuses on knowledge imparting but also emphasizes life education integrated into life, nature, and games in the form of physical practice. Under the guidance of the “Montessori<sup>1</sup>” education philosophy, early childhood physical education in various states in Germany has thrived. Learning from others’ strengths can improve one’s own weaknesses. Given the remarkable achievements that Germany has made in the governance of early childhood physical education, this study will focus on North Rhine-Westphalia (hereinafter called NRW), the state with the largest population, the most developed economy, and the highest quality of sports development in Germany. Combining with the latest *2023-2027 Sports Target Agreement* jointly issued by the NRW government and the NRW Sports Association, this study will use the theory of collaborative governance to summarize the implementation path of early childhood sports in NRW, Germany, and provide enlightenment for the development of China’s early childhood physical education industry (Sportjugend Landes sport bund Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2023).

## 2. Exploration of Governance Implementation Pathways

### 2.1. Background

In the 1990s, the new student entrance examination assessments and early prob-

<sup>1</sup>The term “Montessori education” refers to Montessori education, a method of education named after Maria Montessori (1870-1952), an Italian female educator, which skillfully utilizes the child’s own requirements for growth and realizes the purpose of education without compromising the child’s freedom and happiness, and is a method of education that comprehensively improves the quality of the child and develops the child’s potential.

lem screening reports released by primary schools in Germany showed that many German children had abnormal development in terms of physical strength and coordination, as well as issues such as language delays and attention disorders. In response, various sectors in Germany actively united to emphasize investment in and development of physical education in the early childhood stage. This led to a trend of sports education involving participation from multiple parties including government, associations, clubs, universities, preschool education research institutes, medical institutions, and parents within the states (Wang & Hu, 2010). After more than twenty years of development, NRW in Germany has gradually developed a unique governance system for early childhood physical education.

## 2.2. Governance Structure

To cultivate good exercise habits in children, NRW has primarily mobilized three main actors in action: sports clubs, kindergartens, and families, establishing equal partnerships among the three. Sports clubs serve as a solid foundation for the development of the sports system in NRW and are essential education stakeholders and partners in children's growth, acting as the starting point for lifelong sports participation and playing a crucial role in promoting comprehensive child development. In addition to sports clubs, kindergartens are also important in promoting high-quality sports activities for children, with safe and adequate sports facilities, diverse sports grounds, and professional and dedicated sports teachers being prerequisites for effective sports education. Furthermore, families play a significant role as well—a good family sports atmosphere can provide children with ample material support and strong spiritual encouragement, promoting sustainable development of children's sports enthusiasm.

However, despite the strong social consensus that NRW has developed in early childhood physical education, recognizing that diverse games and sports experiences are the foundation for children's healthy growth, the impact of societal changes brought about by factors such as the pandemic remains objectively present. For example, the pandemic has affected children's motivation for physical activity, leading to a decrease in the number of child members in sports clubs, subsequently reducing the number of club staff and volunteers. Most sports clubs still focus on traditional competitive sports training, making it difficult to meet the diverse sports activity needs of children and lagging behind in developing the club's self-image. Within kindergartens, teachers' awareness of the importance of physical activity has not been raised, resulting in physical education classes often falling short of expectations. Government agencies often instrumentalize sports clubs as "agents" of educational institutions such as kindergartens, without establishing equal partner relationships.

To adapt to changes in the contemporary environment and further clarify the network structure of the main actors in early childhood sports governance, the government of NRW, the NRW Sports Association, and the NRW Youth Sports Association have jointly signed the 2023-2027 *Sports Targets Agreement*. The

agreement aims to combine the capabilities of collaborative partners by constructing a cooperation framework among sports clubs, kindergartens, and families, leveraging synergy to provide children with diverse exercises suitable for their physical and mental development on a daily basis in a low-threshold manner. Additionally, it can also increase the overall society's recognition of promoting physical education during early childhood and to release children's natural inclination towards movement systemically.

### 2.3. Governance Process

To consolidate the foundation of sports development in Germany and achieve governance goals, the main actors represented by sports clubs, kindergartens, and families primarily interact and negotiate cooperation through the implementation of policy plans released by state-level sports associations and various brand projects at all levels. In 2010, NRW proposed the "NRW moves its CHILDREN!" plan, and up to now, 120 professional associations, 160 full-time employees, and 12,000 sports clubs have jointly implemented this plan. To expand the cooperation network, consolidate and develop achievements, NRW has also further developed and improved multiple brand projects around the goal of "promoting physical and mental development of children" in the 2023-2027 *Sports Targets Agreement*. The following mainly introduces two representative projects to illustrate their specific governance processes.

One of them is the "Recognized Movement Kindergarten" project. This project focuses on expanding cooperation between kindergartens and sports clubs to enhance the education sector's emphasis on physical exercise and health. In this project, kindergartens that meet the eight quality standards in **Table 1** will receive the seal of approval "Recognized Movement Kindergarten" issued by the NRW Youth Sports Association. The difference between Recognized Movement Kindergartens and regular kindergartens lies in whether physical activities are the focus of educational work. Recognized Movement Kindergartens are generally private, and they can showcase the kindergarten's characteristics and gain parents' favor through official seal of approval. Additionally, in order to encourage cooperation, all sports clubs supporting Recognized Movement Kindergartens in conducting physical activities for children will be referred to as "Child-friendly Sports Clubs". So far, more than 1000 kindergartens and over 800 sports clubs have received the seal of approval as shown in **Figure 1**.

The second project is the Children's Movement Badge (hereinafter called Kibaz<sup>2</sup>). Kibaz is an innovative movement program provided by sports clubs aimed at children aged 3 - 6. It designs fun and educational sports courses for children in different age groups to promote their personal development in the five areas of health, language, social, science, and art. Different from the traditional single sports courses offered by clubs, the purpose of Kibaz activities is not to measure children's sports performance but to improve their sports skills. Children are

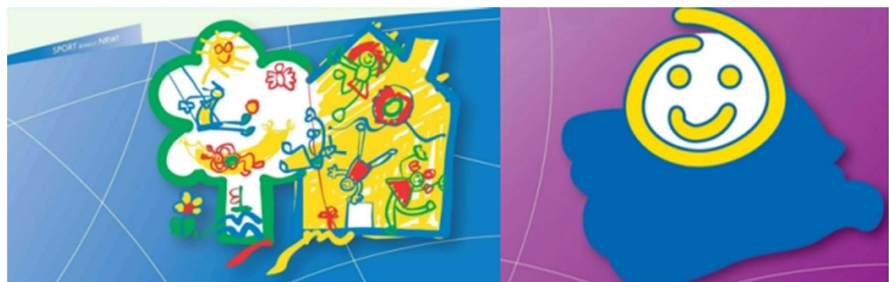
<sup>2</sup>This is a specialized term from the official website of the North Rhine-Westphalia Youth Sports Association in Germany.

**Table 1.** Eight quality standards for Recognized Movement Kindergarten.

Quality Standard	Connotation	Request
Physical Education Philosophy	The philosophy of physical education is the foundation of the Recognized Movement Kindergartens and can be naturally integrated into the kindergarten, whether the kindergarten utilizes the Montessori Method or the Forest Method.	The kindergarten director and staff should be clear: 1) Based on your teaching philosophy, what kind of image is the child. 2) List places where your child can relax, play and try new things in your kindergarten. 3) Explain how the Recognized Movement Kindergarten provides systematic help for the child's personal development. 4) Please tell us about your teaching team.
Movement-themed Training	Recognized Movement Kindergarten staff are required to undergo movement-themed training to learn how to integrate movement into the children's daily lives, thereby developing the children's full personalities.	The content of the training should include: 1) Basic knowledge of physical education integration. 2) Learn to plan, implement and evaluate an exercise program. 3) Improve the ability to promote physical activity in the local education system. 4) Learn various types of sports games. 5) Learn how to safely operate large sports equipment.
Adequate Indoor and Outdoor Exercise	Movement kindergartens should respond to the children's movement nature and encourage them to perceive themselves and the world.	1) Every child should have at least three hours of physical activity every day. 2) Free and non-free activities should alternate, in which children can be creative with their games and in which teachers can provide targeted sports games. 3) Thematic learning should be combined with sports programs and games should be used to promote the integration of learning and sports.
Combination of Sports Space and Lounge Space	A sports kindergarten should have both indoor and outdoor multi-purpose sports spaces and materials and tools to support sports, as well as places to rest.	1) Space for exercise and rest should be actively implemented. 2) Exercise should be integrated into children's lives to the greatest extent possible.
Cooperative Partner	Sports kindergartens establish partnerships with sports clubs for mutual benefit, such as joint sports festivals.	Cooperation with at least one local sports club should be initiated to the maximum extent possible and a cooperation agreement should be signed.
Family Participation	The development of sports kindergartens cannot be separated from the support and participation of families. Parents' understanding and recognition of the value of sports for their children's growth is very beneficial to the development of physical education activities in sports kindergartens.	1) The transparency of kindergarten sports should be increased. 2) Parent-child sports activities should be organized.

## Continued

Public Relations	Movement kindergartens should carry out active public relations work with parents, the community, the government and all other parties closely related to the future development of kindergartens.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) There should be an independent website or video of the kindergarten.</li> <li>2) There should be other channels to show the image of the kindergarten.</li> </ol>
Feedback Reports	After obtaining the seal of quality certification, the sports kindergarten shall report annually to the North Rhine-Westphalia Youth Sports Association on its work and carry out a self-inspection.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Representatives should participate in a “Quality Circle” once a year in order to obtain up-to-date information on the quality assessment of accredited sports kindergartens.</li> <li>2) Evidence of participation in further training should be provided every four years in order to keep up-to-date with motor, psychological and health knowledge.</li> </ol>



**Figure 1.** Seal for the Recognized Movement Kindergartens (left) and Seal for the Recognized Child-Friendly Sports Clubs (right).

encouraged to complete at least ten sports tasks freely without time limits, and those who successfully complete the tasks will receive a certificate and prizes.

Kibaz is one of the important forms of cooperation between sports clubs and kindergartens. Kindergartens interested in implementing Kibaz activities can contact the local sports association for assistance in coordination, or they can directly contact sports clubs to organize activities. During the activities, the clubs and kindergartens can complement each other’s strengths in terms of activity venues, materials, and teams, achieving true win-win cooperation. After the activities are completed, sports clubs are required to fill in feedback forms and activity reports to submit to the local sports association.

Kibaz also provides an opportunity for families to play a role. Firstly, there is the “Kibaz-Family Day” event where sports clubs can offer sports courses suitable for the whole family to participate on weekends and holidays, encouraging parents and children to experience the joy of sports together. Secondly, the “Kibaz in children’s room” provides suggestions for games, drawing, and handicrafts for children in kindergarten age groups and their families to enhance parent-child interaction. Thirdly, the “Digital Advent Calendar” features creative sports mini-games in each electronic window, allowing parents to lead their children to complete corresponding sports tasks indoors or outdoors based on the game instructions. Outstanding families completing the tasks will be re-

warded. For example, in the 2023 event, the Schumann family from the town of Mülheim submitted an outstanding entry and won a family vacation trip to the Innsbruck Sports Adventure Village.

To ensure smooth cooperation, comprehensive sports associations or professional sports associations in various regions provide necessary support and assistance for the implementation of Kibaz activities. For example, associations can actively promote Kibaz in sports clubs, increase the frequency of activities, and expand the scope of cooperation. They also provide funding subsidies, team qualification certification, and game material supplements for the preparation and implementation of activities.

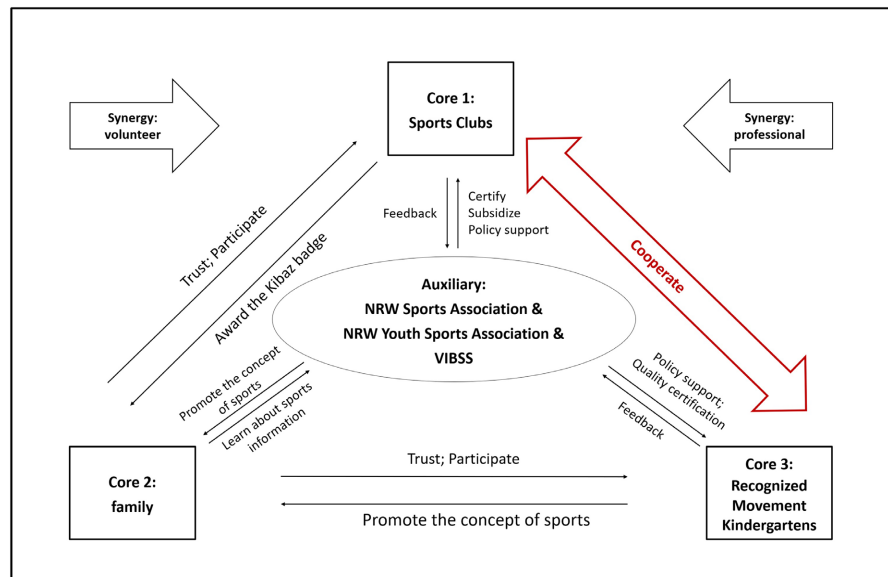
### **3. Summary of Governance Implementation Pathways: Based on Collaborative Governance Theory**

Collaborative governance refers to the comprehensive utilization of resources by the government, private enterprises, and the third sector or civil society in public practices to jointly manage social public affairs, aiming to achieve the governance goal of “the whole being greater than the sum of its parts” (Yan & Lv, 2015).

As a typical country with a bound sports management system, Germany manages its sports industry through collaboration between the government and social organizations. The sports management department of the German government is responsible for macro-control, while social organizations such as sports associations and sports clubs at all levels are responsible for mobilizing, leading, and organizing specific sports activities. Early childhood physical education, as the foundation and starting point of the sports industry in Germany, will involve multiple subjects such as the government, social organizations, and citizens in its governance. These subjects will inevitably form a state of mutual support and cooperation while leveraging their respective resource advantages to achieve common governance goals. Therefore, the theory of collaborative governance is applicable to early childhood physical education in Germany.

Based on the theory of collaborative governance and the aforementioned practical exploration, stakeholders in NRW, Germany, including the government, non-governmental organizations, private sector, and citizens, work together towards the governance practice of early childhood physical education according to specific goals. They regulate their behaviors within a certain system, framework, and mechanism, seeking solutions to problems through interactive games, negotiation, and cooperation (Xiao & Liu, 2024). The governance implementation path of early childhood physical education in NRW can be summarized as “three cores, one auxiliary, and two synergies”, as shown in **Figure 2**.

The term “three cores” refers to the autonomy principle, where sports clubs, Recognized Movement kindergartens, and families act autonomously as the three core entities in the governance of early childhood physical education in NRW. On one hand, they can engage with the grassroots level, directly interacting with children to better understand their various needs, especially in sports.



**Figure 2.** Collaborative governance mechanisms for early childhood physical education in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

On the other hand, they need to fulfill their tasks and missions within the framework of systems, agreements, and policies set by local sports associations. In summary, sports clubs, kindergartens, and families must act autonomously, playing their respective independent roles, as well as cooperate and interact to jointly establish the action foundation for the governance of early childhood sports in NRW.

“One auxiliary” refers to the supportive principle, where the three major associations, the NRW Spots Association, the NRW Youth Sports Association and VIBSS<sup>3</sup>, provide assistance when necessary in the governance of early childhood physical education. In Germany, “supportiveness” is an important theoretical basis for establishing government and social relationships. The “supportive principle” is considered one of the components of contemporary governance theory, emphasizing the importance of institutions and subjects at all levels playing a governance role, especially focusing on the role of grassroots and lower-level institutions (Li, 2021). The three major associations respect and effectively utilize the grassroots organizations such as sports clubs, kindergartens, and families from the bottom up, only providing necessary top-down assistance and support in terms of policies, funding, certification, technology, etc.

“Two collaborations” refer to the collaboration of certified professional forces and spontaneous volunteer forces to assist in the high-quality operation of the governance mechanism of early childhood physical education. In terms of professional forces, NRW launched the “Sports Assistant Program” in 2001, where young people aged 13 - 17, after professional training, can design and organize sports activities for children in kindergartens or sports clubs. Currently, more

<sup>3</sup>VIBSS is an association that mainly provides support services for sports clubs in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. The services mainly include the provision of relevant sports information, counseling, club management training, etc.



than 90,000 young people have completed the training. In addition, to enhance the professional competence of staff within clubs and kindergartens, NRW has developed various types of sports and non-sports certificates, such as certificates in “Movement Promotion in Clubs and Kitas”, “Exercise and play for the little ones (U3)”, and “Association Manager—Children and Young People’s Work Level C”, etc. In terms of volunteer forces, about 13% of members in German sports clubs serve as permanent volunteers, and 17% serve as temporary volunteers, highlighting the necessity and importance of volunteer forces.

Under the macro-control of the government, the governance mechanism of early childhood physical education in NRW, comprising the “three cores, one auxiliary, and two synergies” has established a diverse and equal collaborative governance structure based on “Sports Clubs—Recognized Movement Kindergartens—Families”. It has developed a collaborative governance process with the goal of promoting the physical and mental health of children and driven by the cooperative partnership between clubs and kindergartens. Emphasizing both autonomy and supportiveness principles, it leverages the power of social professionals and volunteers, mobilizing the entire society’s enthusiasm to collectively contribute to the innovative governance of early childhood sports.

## **4. Experience Enlightenment**

### **4.1. Strengthening Policies to Guide Social Consensus and Anchor Governance for High-Quality Development**

The concept is the precursor of action, and a certain development practice is guided by a certain development concept. The successful practice of early childhood sports governance in Germany is built on the broad and strong social consensus that “sports benefit children’s growth”. For a long time, in some places in China, based on inertia thinking, it was believed that children’s work was the responsibility of single departments such as education bureaus or women’s federations. However, in reality, children’s work requires government departments, experts, scholars, social organizations, and even private sectors from multiple social fields such as education, healthcare, culture, sports, law, etc. to work together to promote it (Jiaxing Women, 2023).

Therefore, in order to achieve the goal of high-quality development of early childhood physical education in China, it is necessary to popularize the concept of child-friendly governance and to forge a child-friendly social consensus. In 2021, the National Development and Reform Commission, together with multiple departments, jointly issued the *Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Child-Friendly Cities*, providing a good policy environment for the popularization of child-friendly concepts and the development of early childhood physical education in China (PRC National Development and Reform Commission, 2021). Various local early childhood sports associations, kindergartens, sports schools, early childhood sports training institutions, communities, and other social forces should fully implement the “children first principle”, while improving the quality of early childhood sports services, actively expand

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the promotion of concepts, and create a good social atmosphere. Families should lead by example in creating a healthy family sports atmosphere, establish good parent-child relationships, and cultivate good sports consciousness and habits in children through subtle influence.

#### **4.2. Guiding Social Forces to Participate in Governance and Building a Standardized, Professional and Innovative Model of Collaborative Governance**

In the current context of the whole society paying increasing attention to the physical health and comprehensive development of adolescents, some domestic preschool departments have also started to take the path of “sports feature kindergartens”. They actively cooperate with sports schools, sports bureaus, single sports associations, universities, and other professional institutions, hoping to integrate professional training into kindergarten curriculum education (Gu, 2024). However, such innovative practices have not yet been widely promoted at the regional or national level, and a stable and effective collaborative governance model has not been established. In this regard, we still need to adhere to government leadership while stimulating the autonomy of institutions, non-profit organizations, private sectors, and other entities. Encouraging, supporting, and guiding social forces to participate in the governance of early childhood physical activity and optimizing their participation forms will improve the standardization, professionalism, and innovation of China’s early childhood sports governance system.

Firstly, the government should act as a “mediator”. By leveraging its authority, the government can improve the laws, regulations, and relevant standards related to the participation of social forces in the cooperative governance of early childhood physical education. It can also enhance the entry mechanism, operation mechanism, supervision mechanism, and evaluation mechanism, provide licenses to capable and willing social cooperation organizations in early childhood sports to prevent irregular organizations from deceiving cooperative relationships for profit. Furthermore, establishing a dedicated working group to supervise and evaluate project collaboration outcomes in a timely manner.

Secondly, kindergartens should strive to become more sports-oriented. Whether it is by renovating the kindergarten’s activity venues to make them more conducive to children’s physical activities or by enhancing the physical education theory and technical capabilities of kindergarten teachers to better demonstrate sports to children, the process of “physicalization” of kindergartens is essential as the main base for the development of early childhood physical education (Li, 2018).

Lastly, partners should have a sense of “competition”. Incorporating “professionalism” and “innovation” into the assessment criteria for selecting professional partners for kindergartens will be beneficial for relevant businesses, universities, research institutions, associations, and other social organizations or industry institutions to develop more widely promotable early childhood physical education projects. This will lay the institutional foundation for the birth of

more characteristic projects in the future, such as the “one kindergarten, one project” program.

### **4.3. Balancing Global Vision and Chinese Characteristics to Achieve Governance Effectiveness for Sustainable Development**

Keeping a global perspective can prevent China from losing touch with the international community, but to realize the Chinese dream of building a strong education and sports nation, China must follow its own path. Currently, some domestic kindergartens have borrowed some early childhood physical education teaching methods from sports powerhouses such as the United States, Germany, and Japan. They have also combined Montessori teaching methods and forest teaching methods with sports according to local conditions, innovating traditional teaching models. However, the promotion or return of traditional Chinese sports such as martial arts, dragon dancing, or folk sports games like “jumping houses” and “throwing embroidered balls” in early childhood education still faces great challenges and a long road ahead (Zhang, 2022).

In this regard, on one hand, we need to continue to “bring in” and strengthen international exchange and cooperation in early childhood physical education, borrowing successful experiences from around the world in areas such as sports environment design, sports curriculum innovation, and teacher evaluation systems. On the other hand, we need to focus on Chinese characteristics, emphasize the inheritance and protection of folk sports games, integrate traditional sports elements into curriculum design and venue arrangement, and promote the sustainable development of early childhood physical education in China.

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

Early childhood physical education is an important component of early childhood health education and a crucial means to promote the comprehensive development of children both physically and mentally. The state of North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany emphasizes consolidating the societal consensus on the idea that “exercise is beneficial for children’s growth”, encouraging and guiding social forces to collaborate on the governance of early childhood physical education. This educational philosophy of “Complete Personality, Sports First” and the collaborative governance approach have certain reference significance for the development of early childhood education and sports in China. However, due to differences in sports management systems and cultural backgrounds, China cannot simply replicate the governance experience of early childhood sports in NRW, Germany. Instead, it is necessary to combine the specific circumstances of our country and analyze a development path for early childhood physical education that is more in line with the Chinese context. Children are the hope of the motherland and the future of the nation. It is the common wish of the entire party and society that every child can grow up healthy and strong in step with the times. In the future, adhering to the educational philosophy of comprehen-

sive development in morality, intelligence, physical health, aesthetics, and labor, as well as the concept of coordinated development governance, and focusing on the growth needs of children, widely engaging various sectors of society to work together for the development of early childhood physical education, will be the cornerstone to realizing the dreams of building a strong sports nation and national rejuvenation.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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