

McDowell County School Focus Groups Summary of Findings



Project team members conducted three school focus groups on February 28, 2013 in Welch, WV to identify participant ($N=22$, Females=15) perceptions regarding existent strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats relative to physical activity promotion in McDowell County.

Strengths. Students in McDowell County are generally excited to be involved in physical activity events throughout the school year. This enthusiasm was reinforced in a comment made by a physical educator; "... kids do, when they have an opportunity to be physically involved, they really enjoy it. They look forward to it. They really participate and a lot of times the kids who participate the most are the kids who may not participate in classroom activity." Participants agreed that a contributing factor to student (and emerging family) excitement is that schools are implementing new physical activity initiatives (e.g., Let's Move, Jump Rope for Heart, fitness testing), new sports programs, and afterschool programs with active components. In sum, the school environment can provide the structure for students to make healthy choices in their daily lives both in and out of school.

Weaknesses. Participants agreed that sedentary lifestyles of students and families in McDowell County were linked to a lack of accessible and proximal physical activity resources that would accommodate for the prevalence of multigenerational families being headed by grandparents and great grandparents. The issue of lacking appropriate, safe, and accessible facilities and equipment contributes to a narrow view and sheltered perspective of physical activity and exercise possibilities. The following comment by one teacher resonated with others in the group, "Most of the equipment that we have is based on the sports that the school has, football, volleyball, baseball, ... [but when] I had [the gopher magazines] and I had some of my kids look at it and said 'pick stuff out of there that you'd like' and they [picked] hockey and lacrosse...so I marked down a lot of stuff that they like. I think people would get more interested if we had a [greater] variety." Therefore, recognizing the current weaknesses and limitations allows for greater focus on location/proximity of physical activity opportunities and increasing variety of facilities and equipment in and around schools.

Opportunities. The people of McDowell County are genuinely enthusiastic and interested in physical activity opportunities around their schools to benefit the health of all citizens. One physical educator described, "We were talking about opening up our school for the community... [we are] trying to get people in there and get them physically fit, exercise[ing], [and] get them up and moving, not just our kids but people in the community." School stakeholders emphasized that teaching new content areas in physical education could improve interest and participation among youth, and that a conversion or renovation of existing school facilities for community wellness could improve the well-being of community members. Therefore, one recommendation is to invest resources into school physical activity programming and school-based activity facilities that can serve students and their families. Another trend described the stakeholder's vision for multiple community fitness centers in McDowell County that offered year-round programming and transportation for people of all ages.

Threats. Current threats described by focus group participants include a variety of issues such as: poverty, multi-generational/aging families, condition and rampant vandalism of facilities, drug use/abuse, and road/travel conditions. These macro-level issues alongside the concern of who would step up to run/supervise new physical activity programs threaten the viability of sustainable change in McDowell County schools. This notion was reinforced by a comment made by a participant, "...a lot of the people that volunteer are usually the people who are already working there, even if it come down to [the hiring of] a volunteer position, the people who would volunteer would predominantly be your people who are already there who are already willing to do it either way." To address this in the short term, training local persons to have the skill sets needed to plan and deliver physical activity programming can promote positive change and alleviate some of the strain on current volunteers and provide an incentive for others to become more engaged.