

McDowell County School Site Visits Summary of Findings



Members of the McDowell CHOICES project team visited each of the eleven schools in McDowell County from March 18-19, 2013. The primary purpose of the half-day site visits was to formatively evaluate the school-based physical activity environments and opportunities in McDowell County, with aim of identifying school-specific Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP) strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

While at the schools, members of the project team conducted one-on-one interviews with principals and physical education teachers to learn more about the physical activity opportunities for students before, during, and after the school day that exist and ones they would like to see offered (see Appendix A: Table 4). Team members were also given a tour of the school building, grounds, and play/athletic spaces and facilities to evaluate the availability and condition of existent physical space. Additional information collected from the physical educators included school specific equipment inventory and wish lists (see Appendix A: Table 5), listing of professional development needs (see Appendix A: Table 6), and curriculum scope and sequence.

Data collected during the school site visits were summarized into 11 school-specific narratives that described the context, space and facilities, and the schools physical activity and physical education strengths (assets) and areas for improvement (needs). The narratives were shared with the school superintendent and principals to verify the accuracy of the information. Once approved, members of the McDowell CHOICES project team conducted a qualitative analysis of the narratives to see if there were themes or commonalities across the schools. The following reflects the six themes that emerged from the school site visit data:

- 1. Comprehensive School Physical Activity.** School personnel in McDowell County are aware of CSPAP and its components and are making strides in providing school-based physical activity opportunities for students beyond time already designated for physical education. Yet, many schools reported a need for more before, during, and after school physical activity programming and necessary resources to support them (e.g., equipment, paid leaders, and teacher professional development). Schools also described a need for greater focus on staff wellness and family/community-based physical activity programs, gatherings or events. Related to CSPAP, seven of the eleven schools indicated they had a School Wellness Committee that helps make decisions about physical activity opportunities in the school. Members of the committees include administrators, PE teachers, school nurses, counselors, classroom teachers, and administrative support persons who each bring a unique perspective, set of skills, and level of influence.
- 2. School-based PA Programming.** Currently students in McDowell County have the opportunity to participate in various school-based programs, many of which are offered after school. Program topics range from tutoring, dance, physical activity, the Health Sciences and Technology Academy, and beyond. The high enrollment and participation is evidence of the programs' popularity and success. However, continuation of several of such programs remains contingent upon the renewal of external funding and returning staff/personnel. Many of the schools expressed a desire for these programs to continue, but were interested in new school-based physical activity programs for students as well.
- 3. Physical Education Equipment/Storage.** The majority of students in McDowell County receive physical education between 3 and 5 days per week, which translates to 90 to 250 minutes of weekly physical education time. Given the amount of physical education time offered to students, there appears to be a disconnect between the quantity and quality of available equipment and instructional materials for teachers to use. To plan and implement developmentally appropriate, relevant learning experiences for students, it is important for physical education teachers to have sufficient, safe, and reliable equipment.

- 4. Reporting Fitness Results.** The WV Department of Education requires annual collection and reporting of physical fitness scores for all 4th-12th grade students statewide. Principals and physical education teachers in McDowell County indicated that this requirement is being fulfilled in the county and that at the beginning of each school year there is a FITNESSGRAM refresher workshop for physical education teachers. Unfortunately, however, there is not a system in place for teachers to effectively manage and report results to students, parents/guardians, and county and state-level administrators. Having such a system could assist physical education teachers in using physical fitness progress reports to set individual student goals, track growth trends, and inform physical education curricular and instructional priorities.
- 5. Outdoor PA Space Revitalization.** Most of the schools in McDowell County have adequate indoor physical education/physical activity spaces (e.g., gymnasiums, multi-purpose rooms, lunch rooms), but lack effectively used or maintained outdoor facilities. This issue limits the potential for teachers to plan and implement physical activity opportunities for students, which in turn affects the amount of time students can safely spend in health-enhancing levels of physical activity during the school day.
- 6. Joint-Use Agreements.** This spring in McDowell County the School System Collaborative Innovation Zone passed, granting schools greater flexibility when partnering with outside organizations to respond to community needs such as health and wellness. Five schools identified establishing joint-use agreements or building community partnerships as important next steps in the promotion of physical activity to their students and families. Given that most schools have the best indoor and/or outdoor physical activity spaces in the community; it makes sense to consider how these entities might better share resources.

The school site visits yielded several take-home messages that have implications for future decision-making: (1) increase capacity and resources for School Wellness Committees to promote CSPAP; (2) extend and enhance existing school-based physical activity programming; (3) increase quality and variety of school physical education/physical activity equipment and resources; (4) establish a system for county-wide fitness testing and reporting; (5) revitalize school outdoor physical activity space; and (6) foster joint-use agreements between school and community organization.