

McDowell County Town Hall Meetings Summary of Findings



In cooperation with McDowell County Schools, members of the McDowell CHOICES project team hosted two town hall meetings at Mountain View High School (February 18th, 2013) and River View High School (February 20th, 2013). The primary purpose of these town hall meetings was to provide an overview of Senate Bill 371 (Governor's School System Collaborative Innovation Zone) and solicit feedback from community members. This legislation enables county school systems that are under state board of education control to apply for designation as a School System Collaborative Innovation Zone, with McDowell County receiving the first opportunity to initiate this process.

Any school district that proposes a plan to become a School System Collaborative Innovation Zone is required to conduct two town hall meetings to solicit feedback from community members, parents, school district personnel, business partners, and other interested parties to share information and gather feedback. The resulting plan-of-action must then be shared with all education employees and voted on by teachers and other school service personnel using the prescribed protocol. When passed, the School System Collaborative Innovation Zone designation affords school districts increased flexibility when partnering with outside government, business, higher education, and not-for-profit organizations to effectively respond to a wide range of community needs including health and wellness, job creation and economic development, infrastructure improvement, teacher recruitment, and so forth.

As initially proposed, the McDowell CHOICES Project closely aligns with the intended outcomes of this landmark legislation. Recognizing the related opportunity for collaboration, the McDowell County Superintendent of Schools invited project team members to present at the previously described town hall meetings and solicit feedback related to participant interests and recommendations for enhancing physical activity levels as an important health indicator at the school and community levels. An immediate response system was used to survey the participants ($N=80$) at both meetings and facilitate discussion. The key findings are summarized as follows:

Key findings related to physical activity environment:

- 68% live within 5 miles of the nearest school
- 82% have not used an indoor school facility to be physically active in the last year
- 75% have not used an outdoor school facility to be physically active within the last year
- 96% agreed somewhat or strongly agreed that McDowell County would benefit from having more outdoor play areas available to everyone
- 98% agree somewhat or strongly agree if a suitable outdoor recreational space was available close to home, they would use it at least once a week to be physically active

Key findings related to physical activity opportunities:

- 100% agree somewhat or strongly agree it would be beneficial to have physical activity opportunities available at local public school sites in the evenings and weekends
- 97% agree somewhat or strongly agree it would be beneficial to have physical activity opportunities available at senior centers
- 74% agree somewhat or strongly agree that it would be beneficial to have physical activity opportunities available in church buildings
- 99% agree somewhat or strongly agree there is a need for more children's after-school physical activity programs and clubs
- 100% agree somewhat or strongly agree there is a need for more children's summer physical activity programs and clubs
- 95% agree somewhat or strongly agree they would participate in an organized evening physical activity class if it was available

Key findings related to communications:

- 92% have access to the Internet in their home
- 92% have access to the Internet on a regular basis somewhere else other than their home

The town hall meetings yielded several take-home messages that have influenced our decision-making moving forward: (1) Following the town hall meetings, McDowell County school personnel voted to approve their designation as a School System Collaborative Innovation Zone. This vote confirms that McDowell will be the first county in WV with a legislative mandate to develop and implement county-wide education policy. This is significant in that it mediates many impediments to policy-related strategies such as joint-use agreements and other approaches to community partnership; (2) Despite a reasonable degree of proximity to school facilities and a strong belief that physical activity opportunities in schools should be accessible in the evenings and weekends, residents infrequently access school facilities outside of regular hours for their own physical activity. Furthermore, new and improved outdoor play spaces are needed in McDowell County; (3) There was uniform agreement among residents that there is a demand for additional organized school-based and community-based physical activity opportunities within McDowell County; and (4) Internet access does not appear to be a significant impediment to using various forms of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, project website) for community outreach and interaction.