Childhood obesity rates remain one of the main public health issues in the United States. Low levels of physical activity (PA) and physical fitness have increasingly contributed to the high overweight and obesity rates among children today. Recent estimates indicate that 23.8% of children ages six to 11 years old are overweight, 16.4% of these children are obese, and 6.6% of these children fall into class 2 and class 3 obesity rates (Skinner & Skelton, 2014). Furthermore, research has indicated that individuals living in communities composed of racial and ethnic minorities and in low socioeconomic status communities are more prone to obesity and health-related issues (Morello-Frosch, Zuk, Jerrett, Shamasunder, & Kyle, 2011), which suggests a great need for PA opportunities for children with these demographic risk factors.

Despite widespread efforts and initiatives to integrate PA throughout the school day (e.g., comprehensive school physical activity programs [CSPAP]; coordinated school health; Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child), time for PA opportunities such as recess continues to decline and fall far below the recommended levels (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2010). While recess has been shown to be the most opportune time for increasing PA during the school day (e.g., Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [RWJF], 2007); CDC (2014) reports have indicated that 60% of school districts have no formal policy regarding daily recess. Furthermore, only 22% of school districts require daily recess for elementary school students, with less than half of these requiring at least 20 minutes of recess per day. Despite its benefits, recess is often not being utilized, taken advantage of, or even made available. This is concerning given that the CDC recommendations for a CSPAP state that children should be physically active for at least 60 minutes a day.

Furthermore, disparities in school-based PA and recess opportunities exist for students in low-income schools. Children in urban schools, children in schools with more than 50% minority students, and children in schools with 75% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch have the lowest number of recess minutes per week and are the least likely to engage in school-based PA (RWJF, 2007). These disparities become magnified given that youth in under-resourced communities typically have less access to physically active environments outside of school. Specifically, levels of community violence, cost of extracurricular activities, lack of organized programs, lack of green space, and safety have been reported as barriers to PA among urban youth (Echeverria, Luan Kang, Isasi, Johnson-Dias, & Pacquiao, 2014; Kottyan, Kottyan, Edwards, & Unaka, 2014).

For some, behavioral concerns might play a role in limiting the amount and quality of recess opportunities for students. Violent behaviors at recess have been reported (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Nay, 2003), and up to 23% of urban elementary school students view the playground as an unsafe space (Astor, Meyer, & Pitner, 2001). Considering the school climate at some schools, safety on the playground is a factor that can impede positive health adaptations and needs to be targeted by any recess intervention in this population. Access to equipment, playground design, and supervisory staff who take on an interactive role with children may also be necessary considerations to enhance levels of PA during recess periods (Huberty, Beets, Beighle, Saint-Maurice, & Welk, 2014).

Notably, a lack of equipment coupled with teacher burnout may impede the facilitation of a recess climate in which children are physically active and engaged at high enough levels of PA to benefit their health and well-being. While an abundance of research exists on approaches to increase PA in schools, and findings suggest that these interventions are generally successful, external validity and wide-scale applicability of these interventions remains an issue (McGoey, Root, Bruner, & Law, 2015), particularly in...
urban environments. The purpose of this article is to present evidence-based strategies and underlying critical success factors for school-based recess implementation that can be used by health and education professionals to increase PA opportunities in urban elementary schools.

Interventions to Promote Positive Engagement in Physical Activity and Play

School-based interventions that target the promotion of PA, play, and social-emotional development exist. Recess programs that are focused on these facets of youth development include, but are not limited to, Playworks, Peaceful Playgrounds, and Ready for Recess. Previous research has generally yielded support for the notion that recess programs increase levels of PA (e.g., Bleeker, Beyler, James-Burdumy, & Fortson, 2015; Huberty et al., 2014; James-Burdumy et al., 2016) and can improve the overall playground climate (e.g., Fortson et al., 2013; Massey, Stellino, Holliday, et al., 2017). Less known, however, is how interventions address barriers to PA in urban schools, and how schools, health professionals, and physical educators can incorporate healthy and productive recess periods at their own schools.

To help address this gap and provide practical knowledge for those in the field, the first and second authors of the current article conducted an evaluation of the Playworks intervention (see www.playworks.org) focused on program implementation. (The authors are independent researchers, not affiliated with Playworks.) The information presented next is based on a content analysis that was conducted with data from 15 focus groups that included 77 fourth- and fifth-grade children at Playworks intervention schools, as well as interviews with 13 Playworks coaches (for more methodological details, see Massey, Stellino, Wilkison, & Whitley, 2017; Massey, Stellino, Holliday, et al., 2017). While the strategies offered here are germane to those at Playworks intervention schools, they are presented in a general manner so that those considering other types of recess program implementation may be able to utilize this information. However, as the Playworks program was the focus of the independent evaluation, a brief description of the program is provided first.

Playworks Program

Playworks is a national nonprofit organization that aims to provide opportunities for developmentally appropriate recess for children in low-income, urban school districts. Playworks describes their mission as aiming “to improve the health and well-being of children by increasing opportunities for PA and safe, meaningful play,” (Playworks, 2016) and currently operates in 23 cities, over 1,200 schools, and reaches over 700,000 youth through school-based programming. Playworks assigns full-time paid staff (i.e., “coaches”) in schools serving low-income communities, providing increased play and PA opportunities to students throughout the day (see Fortson et al., 2013 for cost-analysis information). During recess Playworks coaches lead and organize games and activities that are designed to empower students and school staff to take control of the recess environment in a positive way, as well as encourage social inclusion and engagement by students and staff alike. Playworks’ coaches also work with teachers and their students during “class game times,” which allow for PA during the school day (i.e., in addition to recess and physical education class) and help to establish rules, boundaries and expectations that can translate to recess.

Each student receives a minimum of one class game-time period per week, which is roughly 45 minutes in duration. In addition to regular programming, Playworks also provides student leadership opportunities through a “junior coach” program, in which fourth-
and fifth-grade students are recruited and trained to become leaders among their peers. Students in the junior coach program receive extra recess sessions each week, as they spend some recesses “working” as a junior coach and other recess periods playing with their peers. During their “work” shift junior coaches lead games, play with younger children, and encourage others to play and be physically active. Additionally, those in the junior coach program receive two hours of leadership training after school each week, in which physically active games are used to teach leadership and conflict resolution skills.

Empirically Derived Strategies and Critical Success Factors to Program Implementation

Based on the evidence obtained from the authors’ investigation with Playworks participants and coaches, five strategies were identified for health and physical education practitioners to consider in the implementation of school programs focused on increased PA, play, and social-emotional development. An emphasis on two critical factors for successful intervention – the need for holistic programming and teacher and staff engagement – is woven into this discussion of the five strategies. Moreover, many of these strategies are grounded within current CDC guidelines for schools aiming to implement a CSPAP (CDC, 2013).

Strategy #1: Train youth to be peer leaders on the playground. Through interviews with coaches, a consistently identified success factor was the need for integrated and holistic programming, which could be conducted in step five – identify and plan activities – within a CSPAP (CDC, 2013). While a positive and productive recess is the main focus of Playworks, as well as other recess programs, several steps were taken to ensure that children were physically active throughout the school day. Moreover, these opportunities were used to develop skills that transferred to the playground. Junior coaches, or peer leaders, served a particularly critical role toward this objective. Adhering to a philosophy that children and youth are resources for positive change, fourth and fifth-grade students were trained to help facilitate an adaptive climate and PA during recess. This training included setting up the playground with proper equipment, spacing and game opportunities; leadership development; teaching strategies for social inclusion; and teaching strategies for conflict resolution. Junior coaches took on their role as leaders who were responsible for ensuring participation and inclusion at recess. Thus, outside of any actual “recess intervention,” students can be trained to bring a positive culture and a climate that promotes PA on the playground.

Strategy #2: Use classroom PA breaks to create norms and expectations for recess and to teach the social-emotional skills needed for productive engagement. Another component to holistic programming was the use of class game-time or classroom PA breaks. While class game-time provided PA breaks throughout the school day, a key component within steps two (conduct an assessment of PA opportunities), five (identify and plan activities), and six (implement activities) of a CSPAP (CDC, 2013), it was also used to establish norms, rules and expectations that could carry over to recess. In particular, this time was used to teach new games that could later be played during recess.

By introducing and teaching new games during classroom PA breaks, students are able to feel more competent at engaging in these games during the recess period. Further, social-emotional skills such as communication, teamwork and conflict resolution can be taught during classroom PA breaks. For Playworks, class game-time allowed coaches and teachers to work with a smaller number of students (i.e., 20–30) at a time, relative to the number of students at recess (i.e., 100–200), which helped facilitate a more targeted approach. This could also be translated by providing classroom teachers or paraprofessionals the resources and training to conduct effective classroom PA breaks. Importantly, it should be communicated that what is learned during classroom PA breaks is expected to be transferred to recess.

Strategy #3: Develop after-school opportunities to engage traditionally non-active students. A final component of holistic programming was the use of after-school developmental sports leagues (DSLs). Sedentary, and otherwise disengaged, students were targeted as participants for DSLs in an effort to engage them in a fun, safe and physically active environment. By conducting the DSLs, the Playworks program specifically provided opportunities for PA after school through practices and games, developed a safe space to promote competence around PA, and engaged families and communities through attendance at the DSL games. The culture of fun, safety and social inclusion that was created through the junior coaching program, class game-times, and recess was reinforced through the DSLs. Other schools may look to community partners (e.g., YMCA, Boys and Girls Club) in an effort to engage traditionally inactive youth outside of the school day.

An examination of data from coach interviews revealed that a key to success at recess was the integration and coordination across programs offered at the same school. In this way, the climate on the playground was changed through a variety of interventions (i.e., junior coach program, class game time, DSLs) that fed into recess. These interventions specifically targeted, among other things, behavioral expectations, confidence and motivation, the lack of which are known barriers to engagement in PA (Beighle & Morrow, 2014). Thus schools providing their own programs should consider how these factors may enhance or impede PA throughout the school day. Recess also included a structured choice model, in which the playground was structured, but students could choose what activities they wanted to engage in. In creating a structured choice at recess, barriers such as having to create one’s own activity, feeling alone or bored, and a need for autonomy are all addressed (Efrat, 2016).

Strategy #4: Encourage adult participation in play at recess. A second critical success factor related to intervention was the engagement of teachers and staff in the facilitation of a positive and productive recess. While it may be easy to assume that having an appointed recess coach will alleviate the need for teachers to be involved, data from coach interviews indicated that program success hinges on teacher involvement, suggesting the importance of having physical activity leaders (i.e., step one of a CSPAP) in the school (CDC, 2013). Coaches reported that the more teachers were involved, the easier it became to engage children in a cultural change around play and PA during recess. Consequently, this was often seen as the largest barrier to success, and coaches reported needing to build rapport over a long period of time in an effort to get buy-in from the teachers. Overcoming this barrier could be facilitated by changes in school policy that allow staff time to communicate around recess, or incorporate recess design and supervision into teachers’ formal teaching load.

In addition to policy changes, one way in which the Playworks program encourages teacher and staff engagement is by having adults play alongside children on the playground. While adults are often seen as “supervisors,” this alternative approach encourages adults to become participants at recess themselves. In
this way adults become meaningful role models for engagement in PA and promotion of social-emotional competencies at recess (Bandura, 1986). Further, it creates an opportunity for a shift in power differentials, in which students and teachers play in parallel, which can improve student–teacher relationships, ultimately affecting school performance (Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, & Reiser, 2008). While it would be difficult for all adults to be fully engaged in PA and play with students, some adults’ (i.e., teachers, coaches) involvement as recess participants themselves may serve to alleviate conflict on the playground and improve the recess experience.

Strategy #5: Identify energetic leaders willing to invest in recess and youth development. Finally, while holistic programming and teacher and staff engagement were identified as critical factors for successful program implementation, several needs were also identified to ensure these processes ran efficiently. First, it is noteworthy to point out that children involved in the focus groups identified their Playworks coaches as fun mentors for development, teachers, and caring adults. They also noted they would like more help with homework, decision making, and how to teach games. Thus, when considering whom to appoint as a “recess coach” or a physical activity leader for a school, whether an internal or external hire, the coach should be dynamic, fun and willing to invest in the children’s lives beyond recess programming.

In addition to finding the right person, interviews with Playworks coaches indicated that three major interrelated “needs” had to be addressed to ensure successful programming: time, training and task support. Critical to teacher engagement was time to build rapport with teachers and school staff. While this was a unique challenge for contracted coaches (i.e., not previously school personnel), a similar need would likely exist for in-school staff appointed to take on the responsibilities of being the recess coach. Specifically, time to build a culture around recess and to work with staff to establish consistency in rules, norms and behavioral expectations is needed. Also related to time was the need for training. Notably, coaches discussed needing more time to train teachers on the Playworks model, more time for training the school paraprofessionals who ultimately played a key role in recess, and more professional development training related to behavioral management and curriculum design. Again, while professional development training may differ for current educators, training around playground spacing, game development and management, and successful transitions may help improve the recess culture. Finally, task support was needed to manage the moving parts of the holistic programming and complete the required administrative tasks (emails, lesson plans, playground set-up, etc.). While coaches discussed the need for top-down support (i.e., support from both administration and school staff), there was also a need for supplemental staff (e.g., college interns) to help manage the day-to-day work associated with recess programming.

Conclusion

Recess is an integral part of the school day and essential to ensuring that children have access to safe environments for PA. As educators and policy makers push for more CSPAP implementation and more coordinated school health efforts, the critically beneficial role of recess should not be overlooked. However, recess implementation can be challenging in under-resourced schools, particularly when recess becomes a place for bullying and violence, as opposed to an opportunity for PA and cooperative play. While the Playworks program provides an alternative for schools needing external help with recess, the strategies and points discussed in this article can help any school to plan and implement a healthy and productive recess program in which children can grow physically, socially and emotionally. Health and education professionals are encouraged to consider recess as an integral part of the school day and to consider interventions, both within and outside of the recess context, that can facilitate a healthy, safe and active recess period.

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References


