Focusing School Wellness Beyond Physical Education

Shannon C. Mulhearn
Cees Whisonant
Pamela Hodges Kulinna
Shannon Ringenbach
Pamela Powers
Whole school physical activity programs use various means to encourage students, staff, family, and even community members to engage in healthy behaviors. Although resources are often available through websites and professional memberships, barriers continue to be discussed as inhibitors to teachers resulting in programs being abandoned or avoided all together. In this regard, some find it helpful to hear from others and learn how they addressed challenges and found success integrating such programs. The purpose of this article is threefold: first, to provide an overview of conditions leading to the need for whole school programs; second, to highlight two specific programs and suggest ways teachers might use combined resources to provide rewards and incentives for their school community; and, third, to share tips learned from three discussions with teachers and administrators at schools that have initiated physical activity and wellness programs.

The Need for Whole-of-School Physical Activity Programs

Setting the stage for the need for school-based physical activity programming is the state of children’s health in the United States. Although not alone in contributing to increased risk of several chronic diseases, overweight or obesity is a commonly used qualifier for such health concerns. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) website offers a multitude of evidence supporting these concerns (CDC, 2020). Of particular interest is the direct connection between childhood overweight/obese classification and adult classification as the same (Simmonds, Llewellyn, Owen, & Woolacot, 2015). Therefore, solutions at the level of youth becomes a logical starting place to effect change and potentially avoid increased risk classifications altogether.

The World Health Organization (WHO; 2017) noted globally 81% of school-aged children are not engaging in enough physical activity. The National Center for Education Statistics projects over 89% of American children are enrolled in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2019); from kindergarten to high school graduation, students spend most of their time at school as opposed to any other institution (Wechsler, McKenna, Lee, & Dietz, 2004) and thus have the most potential opportunity for physical activity while there. Recently, more educational systems are engaging in roles as physical activity promoters. This has involved sharing successes and suggestions for fluid integration that may decrease barriers and stress for those looking to try something new at their own school. The rest of this article will focus on the following: (1) the CSPAP model; (2) the Healthy Schools Program initiative; (3) noteworthy takeaways from personnel at three schools that implemented a whole-school physical activity program; and (4) the implications for physical educators and schools.

We invite readers to use this information to consider the benefits of combining available resources by looking for shared goals of physical activity programs and initiatives. This may aid in customizing a program to the unique characteristics and contexts of their individual school. As not all practitioners are equally familiar with all physical activity models, we present two fairly popular models that combine easily allowing more members of a school’s community to benefit from physical activity opportunities.

Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program

The Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP; SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2013) is a whole-school model designed to engage students, staff, family and community members by increasing access to opportunities for physical activity. The CSPAP model provides a structural organization to discuss whole-school physical activity programs through its five components (discussed below). Having a five-component model structure allows school personnel options for the gradual introduction of a whole-school physical activity program.

CSPAP begins with a quality physical education program, but also highlights additional opportunities throughout the school day where children can be physically active even when not engaged in sports or skills development. The aim is to increase children’s daily physical activity during school hours targeting the gold-standard minimum of 60 minutes per day of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). The CSPAP model focuses on five aspects of school (described below) that influence access to physical activity: (1) high-quality physical education; (2) physical activity during school; (3) physical activity before and after school; (4) staff involvement; and (5) family and community engagement.

High-quality Physical Education. A successful physical education program can provide momentum toward further support and possible legislation related to healthy schools and communities (Rink, Hall, & Williams, 2010); therefore, it is fundamental for ensuring the success of a CSPAP. A quality physical education program includes a curriculum based on national physical education standards, a focus on meaningful content that is age and skill-level appropriate, and the use of assessment to document student progress and program effectiveness (NASPE, 2004).

Physical Activity during the School Day. Anything taking place between the official start and end of the school day has potential to contribute to this category. Examples include physical activity integrated into content lessons in the classroom, physical activity between content areas, physical activity breaks, lunch recess, and so forth. These opportunities are in addition to a quality physical education program.

Physical Activity before and after School. Additional opportunities to be physically active are often offered to students through organized activities and under adult supervision before or after school. Programming offered to students within this category may include sports programs, physical activity clubs, walking/running programs, intramural activities, and so on. The aim of these activities, as related to children’s physical activity, is for children to be engaged in 30–60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity in a daily session (Beets, Huberty, & Beighle, 2012).

Staff Involvement. Engaging staff members in the promotion of and participation in healthy activities benefits not only the staff, but

Shannon C. Mulhearn (mulhearns@unk.edu) was at the time of manuscript acceptance a doctoral candidate in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers college at Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ. Pamela Hodges Kulmina is a professor in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University in Mesa, AZ. Shannon Ringenbach is a professor in the Kinesiology Program at Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ. Pamela Powers is executive director of the Golden Apple Foundation of New Mexico in Albuquerque, NM.
also the students. Students benefit by hearing staff encourage exercise and seeing staff act as healthy role models; the staff members themselves find that they increase their own levels of physical activity as well. Examples of how schools might increase staff involvement in a CSPAP might include an employee wellness program, a school walk/run program that includes staff and students, and inviting staff to sponsor/supervise physical activity clubs (e.g., Langley & Kulinna, 2018).

Family and Community Engagement. Parental influence on children's physical activity (Loprinzi & Trost, 2010) is one reason to encourage parental participation in school physical activity events, potentially increasing parents' positive exercise experiences and attitudes. Providing opportunities for participation in school health promotion may come in the form of invitations to health fairs, fun runs and family nights. Local businesses might host a booth at a school fair, which exposes parents to local resources for health and physical activity. These collaborations provide community members a space to communicate and to support one another.

The CSPAP model provides structure and resources such as checklists for creating opportunity and access to physical activity. There are other programs sponsored by professional sports teams (e.g., NFL Play60) and other media personalities (e.g., Hip Hop Public Health) that fit easily within the CSPAP model by providing simple ways to help teachers include additional physical activity in their classrooms or at school. These resources can inspire fresh ideas to help students and staff establish these physical activity habits. CSPAP does not include incentives (such as student awards or school banners), but it does provide a clear structure for those looking to increase students' access to physical activity opportunities. Therefore, one benefit of participating in other programs, such as those listed previously, includes receiving rewards for the students and school related to increasing physical activity. In the following section we will look at one national program, the Healthy Schools Program (HSP), and the standards established for attaining their levels of distinction, thereby becoming eligible for school-wide incentives.

Healthy Schools Program

Fitting in with the CSPAP model, the HSP initiative aims to develop a culture where physical activity and physical education interact seamlessly with academics, leading to overall success for students and staff (www.activeschoolsus.org). Incentives are in place to promote schools' celebrating reaching goals, thus improving the healthy culture of their campuses. The Healthy Schools Program lists criteria for receiving the National Healthy Schools Award as being schools that meet best practice criteria established by the Centers for Disease Control (Alliance for a Healthier Generation [AHG], 2020b). Award-winning schools receive national recognition through inclusion on the AHG website, and they also receive additional promotional materials (such as a large indoor banner and posters) in order to recognize and encourage ongoing success.

Once registered for the HSP, school personnel gain access to free online resources for the planning and creation of a healthy and active school. The first step HSP recommends is to complete an assessment and evaluate existing positive physical activity integration along with potential opportunities for changes or improvements. The evaluation leads to developing a customized plan for implementation—referred to as the action plan (AHG, 2020a). With the online tools, the action plan suggests specific strategies tailored to their school, shows resources available for funding and local support, and offers a systematic plan for developing and achieving school-level goals.

HSP Award Level Standards

The award levels in this program are set up like those at the Olympics, with bronze, silver and gold indicating incremental improvements in a school's physical activity programming (for a full description, please refer to the HSP website: https://www.healthier-generation.org). Attaining award status can include a monetary incentive and act as a local energizer within the school as students, staff and visitors can see the physical reminders of their status. Herein lies the beauty of cross-sourcing and making use of available programs: the CSPAP model is gaining popularity but can seem daunting; however, by using reward programs like this, incorporating a whole-school CSPAP becomes more manageable.

Noteworthy Themes among Three Schools

We recently spent time with school personnel at three schools (an administrator and physical educator at each school) that had registered with the HSP to learn more about their experiences so others might benefit from their lessons learned. School personnel shared their thoughts related to aspects supportive of including additional physical activity as well as some of the challenges they faced in their journey.
School Characteristics. The first school (Russet Elementary, pseudonym) was categorized as “Bronze Award Eligible” in the Healthy Schools Program. The other two were “non-award eligible” (hereafter referred to as National Elementary and Northward Elementary). Table 1 depicts the school-level demographics for these three school communities to provide more context within which these programs were created. Russet Elementary School was, at the time, a “technology-focused” school and implemented changes years prior to the HSP program, including providing each student with access to digital technology. Related to attaining award status with the HSP, Table 1 also points out differences between the Bronze Eligible and Non-award Eligible schools, such as staff members registered with the HSP website and amount of time each school offered physical education. The latter is generally controlled by state- or district-level policy, making award eligibility sometimes challenging.

Facilitating Successful Implementation

Even with resources openly available to registered schools, not all schools easily find success in meeting the goal of providing opportunities for 60 minutes of physical activity per day. In the spirit of teachers helping teachers, we wanted to hear from school personnel about the implementation process. We looked for HSP-registered schools in the area and found three. In the following section we will share what we learned about the process of integrating these physical activity programs from these three schools. We will conclude with a summary of tips for an easier transition to implementing whole-school physical activity initiatives discussed herein.

Table 1. School-level Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Russet</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Northward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FRL %</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades</td>
<td>K–5</td>
<td>PK–6</td>
<td>PK–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSP</td>
<td>3/19/13</td>
<td>3/24/14</td>
<td>5/2/13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. FRL = Free and Reduced Lunch; HSP = Healthy Schools Program

Implementation Checklist. In order to compare basic information related to the implementation of HSP, we created a checklist showing an overview of each school’s involvement level. Sources for this included the HSP website and staff members and administrators from each school. Outcomes from the schools’ implementation checklists are provided in Table 2. This checklist reveals two key aspects that set the Bronze school apart from the other two schools. The first item, number of team members registered with HSP, is important because all school staff or administrators who individually register on the website get updates through electronic newsletters and gain direct access to tools and resources they can use to help their schools’ physical activity efforts. As shown in the table, only Russet Elementary had numerous staff members listed on the website as registered for the physical activity program. The second interesting item, minutes of weekly physical education scheduled, showed that only Russet was meeting the recommendations by both the CDC and AHS. This particular item is often a district-level or policy issue that physical education teachers do not control.

The following is an overview of lessons learned from this group of educators. During the discussions we talked about both facilitators and barriers in order to learn more about developing whole-school physical activity programs. Table 3 provides some examples and suggestions for implementation learned from these discussions. The barriers and tips for overcoming them are presented more narratively as these challenges are more likely to lead to foregoing implementing whole-school physical activity programs.

Common Facilitators to Success

Across the schools, relevant factors that supported whole-school wellness were previous exposure to any type of programming related to the promotion of wellness, having the support of such programming from other teachers and administrators, having spaces on campus that were specifically dedicated to physical activity, and making use of resources already in place such as events at the school and online tools. Please see Table 3 for specific examples of each as well as suggestions for putting these facilitators into action. Similarly, the following discussion of barriers may help identify things to watch for or to preemptively begin addressing to help the transition to school-wide physical activity go more smoothly right from the start. The third column in Table 3, titled “How to Do It,” offers tips for overcoming many of these barriers.
### Table 2. Implementation Checklist Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Checklist Item</th>
<th>Russet</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Northward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team members registered with HSP</td>
<td>Physical education teacher and multiple staff members</td>
<td>Physical education teacher only</td>
<td>Physical education teacher only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minutes of Physical Education per week</td>
<td>30 minutes two times per week</td>
<td>45 minutes per week</td>
<td>40 minutes per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous physical activity programs to HSP at school</td>
<td>Text Pangrazi, Beighle and Pangrazi, (2009)</td>
<td>Let's Move! Active Schools at the district level</td>
<td>No previous program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. HSP = Healthy Schools Program.*

### Table 3. Facilitators to Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>How to Do It</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Previous exposure to Whole-School Wellness Program</td>
<td>One school utilized a school PA book (Pangrazi, Beighle, &amp; Pangrazi, 2009) with tips for classroom activities</td>
<td>Pick a small aspect of the programs discussed here and implement one or two small changes to get the school used to PA promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator support</td>
<td>Principal at Russet had a personal belief that PA benefits students physically and academically</td>
<td>Invite your administrator to your PA events. Provide your administrators with research showing benefits to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space dedicated to movement</td>
<td>Open gym times or a separate room designated as a Movement Lab</td>
<td>Set aside times and allow classroom teachers to sign up to take their students to these spaces to promote movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making use of resources</td>
<td>PA-specific grants to buy equipment for classrooms, GoNoodle provides activity demonstrations</td>
<td>Use online and print resources from the two programs discussed in this article or from program texts. Checklists, how-to's and videos give a clear place to start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher buy-in</td>
<td>PA champion at Russet showed teachers how to bookmark online resources making them easier find. At National, the physical education teacher made laminated cards with brain breaks easily performed in a classroom</td>
<td>Many classroom teachers are not comfortable integrating movement in their rooms. Give them ideas for using PA to enhance their academic content. Make the program user friendly and focus on enjoyment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-wide activities</td>
<td>Field days and lunch time running clubs. Marketing for these events is seen by all students and teachers and builds excitement</td>
<td>Promote upcoming PA events in the school newsletter, on announcements, and through signage in the cafeteria or main lobby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community engagement – using what is already in place</td>
<td>Russet Elementary had an ongoing “Family Literacy Night” with free events which the PE teacher used to teach about nutrition</td>
<td>Find public structures already in place and find ways to integrate healthy knowledge or activities into these opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>“I started talking about it and how I thought our kids and community would benefit. Slowly, I started making changes.” – Russet teacher</td>
<td>Resist the temptation to change everything all at once. Implement one or two changes at a time and allow them to settle in before adding another level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: PA = physical activity*

### Common Barriers

**Lacking Administrator Support.** There was a belief at both National and Northward schools that administrators “supported what they were doing, but not enough” to generate enthusiasm within the rest of the teaching staff. Without administrative support, it was suggested that classroom teachers were not encouraged to try more physical activity in their classrooms. A specific example would include the administrator not allowing for physical activity breaks during school-wide testing.
District Policies out of Synch. As schools are housed within a district, it is clear that policies at the district level will affect school-level decisions. For both National and Northward, district-level policies regarding physical education requirements affected their ability to even be award eligible for HSP. Specifically, at the district level for National Elementary, only 45 minutes per week of physical education were required, leaving that physical education teacher unable to alter school-level scheduling to even be eligible for HSP award status.

Several teachers indicated a desire to have a lobbyist at the district level to advocate for increased support of these types of physical activity programs in schools. They also mentioned a need for districts to provide additional professional development related to integrating movement into their particular discipline. The physical educator at National stated, “It would be nice if there were local workshops beyond just ‘physical activity leader’ trainings where teachers could get certified hours [rather than] just at the [larger] conventions.”

Time. Teachers at Northward reported being excited at the start of the year and even integrating activities such as “brain energizers” (short physical activities to let students move and to help them refocus on their academics) into their classroom early on; however, due to feeling a lack of time they had tapered off by the end of the year. The principal at Russet also talked about this barrier, saying, “it is hard to fit in activity during the school day and that is why we have scheduled shorter [activity] breaks.” Finding success by planning shorter breaks throughout the day supports the idea that teachers see benefits to students’ alertness and attention even from brief opportunities for physical activity similar to previous findings from Corhan, Kulinna and Garn (2010) and Kulinna (2016).

These same barriers have been noted in previous research on whole-school physical activity models (e.g., Delk, Springer, Kelder, & Grayless, 2014; Eather, Morgan, & Lubans, 2013) and are included here to share simple ways teachers and administrators at these three schools found to address common roadblocks. Teachers’ workloads are already stacked rather high, and it is difficult to create strategies for overcoming barriers alone. Through sharing these common experiences, perhaps other teachers and schools can also provide beneficial physical activity programming such as a CSPAP with less friction.

Discussion of Healthy School Models

In this article we focused on two specific whole-school models, CSPAP and Healthy Schools Program. In a combined effort to address health concerns and decreased funding or support of
physical education programs, these types of whole-school physical activity designs have come to exist. Such large-scale reforms allow physical education teachers to widely promote the integration of physical activity into all areas of the school day. Participation in these types of programs may also act as a platform encouraging policy reform leading to changes such as increased physical education class time per week.

Based on the discussions with stakeholders at three schools, it is recommended to remind teachers to use online resources while also helping them see how easy they are to access. Ideas included live demonstrations at staff meetings or printed web guides to aid in navigating such websites and fostering confidence in locating those easily implemented lessons or activities. We also recommend that everyone remembers to use technology to your advantage rather than as an obstacle to physical activity as our technology-focused school did. Use the technology to support movement through activity websites or creating activity photo journals if you have classroom sets of tablets.

In summary, this article highlights common barriers to whole-school programming for teachers and administrators at three schools, including insufficient administrator support (for teachers), competing district policies, and time. Common facilitators to programming for these teachers and administrators included previous exposure to any type of whole-school programming, dedicated space for physical activity, and the ability to use existing resources such as school events (e.g., STEM and fitness night) and online tools. If you are interested in bringing a healthy school initiative such as CSPAP or the Healthy Schools Program to your school, engage your administrator in a discussion first because administrative buy-in and support can lead to success. Arrive at their door with the resources and be ready to discuss the school-wide (academic, parental participation, school culture, etc.) benefits possible with successful implementation.

ORCID
Shannon C. Mulhearn https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4496-0316

References


