Recess Policies and Practices in West Virginia Elementary Schools

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Background

The Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) reports on childhood obesity were a call to action for focused policy efforts on childhood obesity prevention.1,2 Numerous federal and state health policy initiatives have emerged in response to this call.3,4 The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act (CNSA) of 2004, which required Local Education Agencies to develop Local Wellness Policies (LWPs), is an example of such action at the federal level.5 In addition to addressing nutrition, the LWPs were required to address physical activity.

In 2005, the West Virginia (WV) Legislature issued its own response to the childhood obesity epidemic by enacting the Healthy Lifestyles Act. This Act established requirements for: (1) time spent in physical education,* (2) the types of beverages sold in schools, (3) fitness assessments, (4) health education instruction and assessment, and (5) BMI measurements.6

Both the CNSA and the Healthy Lifestyles Act presented opportunities for schools to make their environments healthier and more supportive of healthy eating and physical activity. In addition to meeting the requirements of the aforementioned laws, schools could have gone above and beyond and adopted what are known as “best practices” in other areas. One area of interest is recess for elementary schools.

Recess is widely recognized as important for elementary school children. A recent study of 8-9 year old children found that having a daily recess period of ≥15 minutes in length was associated with better teacher ratings of classroom behavior.7 Recess is also thought to be an important venue for helping children attain the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity.8 The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends (1) providing recess at least once daily, for ≥20 minutes, (2) not using it as a replacement for physical education, and (3) not withholding it as a consequence of misbehavior.9 Nationally, 57% of school districts require regular time for recess at schools to provide students with regularly scheduled recess.10 As part of a statewide, multi-component evaluation of county-level LWPs and the WV Healthy Lifestyles Act, we collected information about recess practices and policies at the elementary level.

Objectives

This paper provides information on recess practices and policies at the elementary level. These data were collected during the 2007-2008 school year in conjunction with a statewide, multi-component evaluation of county-level LWPs and the WV Healthy Lifestyles Act. Support for this evaluation was provided by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Methods

We conducted a statewide electronic survey of WV public school superintendents (n=53; 95% response rate) and elementary school principals (n=391; 84% response rate), a content analysis of all county LWPs (n=55), and a content analysis of qualitative data from paper surveys of physical education teachers (n=398; 57% response rate) during the 2007-2008 school year. Areas of inquiry pertinent to this paper include the:

- Extent of county policies requiring or recommending recess
- Number of minutes of recess required
- Extent of LWPs mentioning recess or student physical activity levels during recess
- Extent of school-level policies prohibiting removing recess to punish students for misbehavior
- Physical education teachers perceptions about the use of recess to supplement physical education time

Descriptive Statistics were calculated using SPSS 15.0

Results

County Recess Policies:

- 56% of counties reported requiring recess for elementary students
- 34% of counties recommended recess for elementary students
- 11% of counties did not require or recommend recess for elementary students

Among Counties Requiring Recess:

- 24% required 10-15 minutes
- 52% required 20-29 minutes
- 24% required ≥ 30 minutes

Presence of Language about Recess in Local Wellness Policies (LWPs):

- 25% of LWPs included language about required/recommended recess
- 18% of LWPs included language about student physical activity during recess

School-level Recess Policies:

- 24% of elementary principals reported having a policy that prohibited removing recess to punish students for misbehavior

Discussion

- Current guidelines recommend children engage in 60 minutes of physical activity each day
- Recess is an important venue through which students can be physically active at school
- Recess is an underutilized physical activity opportunity for children in West Virginia elementary schools
- Schools in West Virginia should be encouraged to adopt best practices regarding recess, particularly policies prohibiting using recess as punishment for student misbehavior

Qualitative Findings

- Physical Education teachers voiced concerns about the use of recess to supplement physical education time: “Classroom teachers allow students to stand around at recess. They (the students) are not active enough. Counting PE/fitness at recess is like telling a student to work on reading or math at recess.”

References