Rationale

Physical activity is a crucial part of addressing our nation’s obesity epidemic and the growing burden of related chronic disease (IOM, 2005). Physical activity in schools can improve students’ physical and mental health, classroom behavior and academic performance (ALR, 2009). Physical education and sports are important, but in our schools, as well as in our communities, broad, sustained improvements in health across different segments of the population, will require moving physical activity beyond the confines of gyms and playing fields. The school day is full of potential opportunities for students to engage in physical activity, that, along with physical education, can yield numerous health and education benefits. By assessing and communicating information about these opportunities, the “School Physical Activity Report Card” (SPARC) can help members of school communities identify strategies and monitor progress towards maximizing the potential of these opportunities.

The Problem

Opportunities for physical activity at school have generally been eroding, a result of a confluence of factors including pressure to demonstrate improved educational progress, various curricular and program mandates, injury liability concerns, and budget cuts. At the same time, an increasing number of children and youth are overweight and obese, a trend driven in part by well documented deficiencies in the amount of daily physical activity.

Eroding opportunities for physical activity in schools

- Nationwide there is pressure to reduce or eliminate P.E. to make more time for instruction in academic subjects covered in standardized tests (California Center for Public Health Advocacy, 2006b; California Department of Education, 2005a; California State Assembly, 2006; National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2006b).

- Official statistics may overstate the actual amount of P.E. in schools. A 2004 national survey of state obesity control policies concluded that P.E. requirements are rarely enforced, insufficiently funded; viewed as expendable in comparison to core curriculum requirements such as math and reading, and are frequently waived through exemptions (Trust for America’s Health, 2004).

- A review of California’s state department of education’s records, found that more than half of California school districts fail to meet the mandated elementary school P.E. requirement of 200 minutes every ten days (California Center for Public Health Advocacy, 2006a). Even when P.E. is offered, the extent to which students are actually physically active (i.e. engaged in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, aka “MVPA”) may be reduced by large class sizes with insufficient supervision and equipment (UCLA Center to Eliminate Health Disparities and Samuels and Associates, 2007).
Information is part of the solution

SPARC is an information tool for school decision-makers and stakeholders. Schools can use it to informally plan and monitor progress towards making more effective use of existing opportunities for physical activity throughout the school day. SPARC could also be incorporated into existing school reporting requirements, such as the federally mandated School Accountability Report Cards that schools and school districts make available to the Public. School officials, LEAs and other members of school communities can use SPARC to systematically assess, inform, and create improved opportunities for physical activity throughout the school day. Incorporating SPARC into existing requirements and procedures, such as School Accountability Report Cards and School Wellness Plans, could provide school personnel, parents and community groups with more complete information about opportunities for physical activity and what schools are doing to make maximize the use of existing resources to maximize student wellness and learning.

Development of the SPARC

The School Physical Activity Opportunities Report Card (SPARC) was developed by the UCLA School of Public Health with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Active Living Research

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1 While media outlets abound with reports of lawsuits against schools for injuries incurred during recess and PE, it is difficult to ascertain the trends in the number of lawsuits or consistent patterns in the decisions and settlements. In general, courts appear to defer to schools as long as school personnel exercise “duty to care.” (Bossenmeyer, undated).
Program. Our tool was developed through evaluation of existing policies at five case-study schools in Southern California using rapid “health impact assessments” (HIAs).

**Use of SPARC**

At the core of SPARC audit tool is a straightforward observation form on which observers note when, where and how many students are present and active during different parts of the school day. Observers can be trained in audit procedures for the SPARC in less than one hour; no special skills or previous experience is required. Data entered into the MS-Excel-based SPARC form are automatically summarized showing:

1. Actual and potential minutes of activity throughout the school day for different time periods and activities (e.g. P.E., recess, lunch period, etc.)
2. Person-minute averages combining activity duration and number of students, and
3. Comparisons of girls’ versus boys’ engagement in different types of physical activity.

In addition to the summary graphs (such as the ones shown above), SPARC forms also document the quantity and quality of space and facilities available for students.

**Other Examples of Physical Activity Report Cards**

- “Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth.” [activehealthykids.ca](http://activehealthykids.ca) (Inception date: 2005)
- Researchers in Mexico are collaborating with Canada to produce a physical activity report card

**Recommendations**

1. The California Department of Education and local school districts develop procedures for incorporating SPARC data into schools’ School Accountability Report Cards;

2. Schools with guidance from their Local Education Agencies (LEAs) include SPARC self-assessments as part of their Wellness Plan monitoring and reporting activities.
References


