Creating lasting community-based physical activity programs

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Introduction

Schools and communities often collaborate with outside planners and researchers who, in some cases, are those who developed the program or intervention idea. In community-based interventions, such as physical activity (PA) program planning, successful and sustainable programs are those in which the school and/or community stakeholders are meaningfully engaged to the point where these stakeholders take ownership over development and implementation. When meaningful engagement is incorporated throughout the program or intervention development, this can lead to greater community input into school-based PA program planning, thus resulting in greater community ownership and ultimately more sustainable program outcomes.

For ownership to occur, school and community stakeholders must feel meaningfully engaged in all aspects of the program/intervention development and implementation. One way to build towards ownership is to ensure stakeholders have real decision-making power through all stages of the project, such as identifying gaps and the need for a new program, and/or deciding key strategies and approaches to fill the gap.

When there are multiple community-based organizations working in collaboration, there is also a need to establish and maintain strong working linkages among all. It is through these linkages that knowledge and information flow to support areas of common interest, such as community PA promotion.

There are many good strategies for engaging with community stakeholders and helping ensure that they ultimately take ownership of the intervention programming process. One tried-and-true approach is to create a project advisory committee that includes all the appropriate stakeholders needed for program success. For example, following the Active & Safe Routes to School’s (ASRTS) School Travel Planning (STP) process, a program advisory committee can undertake a comprehensive and collaborative process covering: (1) Program Setup; (2) Data Collection and Problem Identification; (3) Action Planning; (4) Implementation; and (5) Ongoing Monitoring.
How do you make sure that the community stakeholders remain fully engaged and ultimately own the program? When everyone is very busy, it is too easy to simply allow the outside consultants, experts or programmers to take charge. But research has shown that without community engagement and ownership, programs have a lesser chance of achieving traction.\textsuperscript{13-15}

**Effective Engagement Strategies**

Strategies for effective engagement of community stakeholders in program development, implementation and evaluation can be found in the literature on community-based participatory research.\textsuperscript{9} Applying many of these strategies have been shown to lead to sustained community ownership over the program implementation process.\textsuperscript{5,9} Some strategy highlights are described in Table 1.

**Table 1. Common strategies for effective engagement of community stakeholders in program development, implementation and evaluation**

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<tr>
<th>Create a Project Advisory Committee</th>
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<td>Form a committee of all key stakeholders, including representatives involved in addressing the issue and implementing a successful program. Advisory committees allow for inclusion of all viewpoints throughout the program process and joint development of dissemination strategies and action plans. The committee may also include outside consultants, planners or other experts, but care should be taken that a decision-making process is chosen that favours the community partners.</td>
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<th>Develop a Stakeholder Agreement</th>
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<td>Before the project begins, clearly spell out partner roles and responsibilities, outline how decisions will be made, and set out what to do if conflict arises. Agreements may also include things such as resource distribution, cost sharing, and plans for data ownership and control.</td>
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<th>Choose a Champion</th>
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<td>Every project needs a champion. Ideally, this will be someone from the community, but it doesn’t have to be! Sometimes an outside expert or consultant is in a much better position to act as project champion because that is their job and are given the time and resources to do it well. Busy community stakeholders who already have full-time jobs are unlikely to be able to commit the time necessary to coordinate all aspects of the project. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that the decision-making power remains vested with the community, as described above. Examples of tasks for the project champion to maintain momentum include: preparing and distributing meeting documents; collating data; and managing team communication (see below).</td>
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Without frequent and timely communication, project stakeholders may lose interest — or worse, feel ignored and disempowered. Keeping in touch by phone, email or even through social media, ensures that everyone knows what is going on in-between formal meetings.

Keep the Committee Busy
Whenever possible, try to give members of the committee interesting and engaging tasks. For example, some committee members can partner with local public transportation to collect data on traffic safety. Or members might be interested in learning new analysis skills and participating in data analysis. Capacity building often piques interest!

Facilitate Stakeholder Involvement
The project champion should do everything possible to make stakeholder participation easy, enjoyable and relevant to their regular day jobs.

Discuss Progress and Interim Results
It’s very important for the stakeholders to regularly discuss project progress. There should be no surprises, even if things are not going as planned. Returning stories of success or early evaluation results keeps the committee motivated.

Build Capacity or Provide Training
As mentioned above, providing members with new skills can be invigorating! It also means that the project is helping build the individual, organizational and social capacity needed to sustain the final program — and indeed other unanticipated programs to come.

Table 1: Common strategies for effective engagement of community stakeholders in program development, implementation and evaluation (con’t)

Communicate Frequently
Without frequent and timely communication, project stakeholders may lose interest — or worse, feel ignored and disempowered. Keeping in touch by phone, email or even through social media, ensures that everyone knows what is going on in-between formal meetings.

In Summary
Engaging community stakeholders throughout program/intervention development and implementation can have implications for meaningful impact in terms of ownership and sustainability. As highlighted, engagement can be done in a variety of settings and can be a highly adaptable process. It is important to note that not all strategies will work for everyone. The key is to find a set of strategies that work best with your school and community stakeholders in your setting to build lasting partnerships and programs.

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References


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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