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Implementation of an active school project in a rural environment
in Wallonia. A collaborative study

The need for interventions aiming to increase youth physical activity is evidenced by
health authorities (OMS, 2006). The educational system is clearly considered as a key setting
in physical activity promotion (Pate et al., 2006). The concept of the “active school” has been
proposed in order to underline the multidimensional aspect of any project aiming to contribute
effectively to the promotion of an active lifestyle within schools and some specific models
have been proposed (Cale, 1997; Ophea, 2006). At least six dimensions seem to be
systematically considered in the literature: school policy, physical education, active
transportation, extra-curricular sport, living environment and classroom emphasis on physical
activity. In an attempt to address the current emphasis on physical activity, some schools have
embarked on working this area but many seem to lack strong direction and strategy, despite
the resources that have been produced by numerous agencies or associations.

This paper is concerned with a study that followed the efforts of one small elementary
school located in a rural area of Wallonia which aimed to implement the principles of the
active school concept. The aim of the paper is to describe the process and underline the
problems encountered by those involved in the project during the first year of implementation.

Researchers were contacted by the school principal and one teacher identified as the
coordinator in order to provide some support to the project. This consulting role comprised
two main aspects: (1) guiding the process and (2) evaluating the impact. Taking a
collaborative approach, practitioners were the central agents in the process determining their
own needs, according to the information gathered by the researchers.

Data were collected during the whole school year through questionnaires (pupils,
parents), interviews (staff members, community stakeholders) or focus group (pupils).
Moreover, several activities organised by the staff members or external partners were
observed. Finally, several documents were analysed (such as pupils’ work, newspaper texts).

The main adaptation the school made was to the organization of sport during one
afternoon per week (in addition to the 2 weekly 50 minute PE lessons). In addition, other
initiatives were organised including: physical activities proposed by classroom teachers,
changes to the organisation of recess, and involvement of community members within the
active life of the school. Despite some problems, levels of physical activity clearly increased
during the year. The problems encountered were of 2 types: organizational (availability of
finances to hire sports facilities, efficient transportation of pupils, availability of sports
equipment for PE lessons and recess); and relational (concurrency between the studied school
and another, involvement of the PE teacher, low level of parental involvement, poor external
communication, variability of teachers interest towards the project). However, most of the
problems were resolved by the coordinator via increasing the activities offered by the school
and lobbying public authorities. Unfortunately, her enthusiasm was not necessarily shared or
transferred to all teachers and some were not as motivated, due sometimes to a lack of autonomy. On the other hand, pupils and parents outlined positive changes, as confirmed by the questionnaire analyses. Moreover, during the final meeting with the parents, all comments supported the continuation of the project in the future.

References


Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (2006). *Ophea’s programs*. Consulté le 29/05/06 sur Internet: [http://www.ophea.net/Ophea/Ophea.net/asfrench.cfm](http://www.ophea.net/Ophea/Ophea.net/asfrench.cfm)
