Let the Games Begin: Recess at Thomasville Primary School Makes Every Student a Winner

**Issue:** A 2014 assessment of the 900 K-3 students at Thomasville Primary School in North Carolina diagnosed a range of problems, from obesity to playground bullying, and the prescription seemed simple: more physical activity. But while the school playground had lots of grassy space and equipment, the students were being confined to a small section consisting solely of four swings and a set of monkey bars. Besides having little to play on or with, students were often being withheld from recess as punishment, contrary to state guidelines.

A wellness team headed by Healthy Eating Active Living Coordinator (HEAL) Alyson Shoaf embarked on radical recess reform, beginning with grant-supported training from Playworks on recess. In order to make a significant impact, however, the major changes required full teacher engagement and the enthusiastic support of the administration. The recess team decided to hold off until the start of the new school year to make changes. A member of SHAPE America, Shoaf turned to the professional organization for more information. At the SHAPE America National Convention, she attended a workshop on evidence-based strategies for recess by SHAPE America and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. At the Southern District Conference, she discovered “Dr. Recess” and “SPARK ABC” programs. Inspired, Shoaf returned from both meetings with fresh conviction and the information she needed to enlist the principal, Dr. Angela Moore, as a strong advocate.

**The Big Idea:** Thomasville’s Active Recess Program was designed to incorporate more activities and games into each day’s 30-minute recess. First, the playground was reorganized into five individually colored and uniquely equipped activity zones, through which each class would rotate during the course of the school week. Each zone would be monitored by teachers to ensure that all students were involved in the ongoing games — including “switch,” a more active version of musical chairs — and developing a variety of skills on each of the play structures.

**Implementation:** At the start of the 2016-17 school year, the Thomasville Primary School staff met in preparation for the new recess program. Shoaf spent

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, Let’s Move! Active Schools and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.

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three weeks on the playground teaching games and ensuring that everyone understood the new playground structures, rotation and procedures; as well as how to supervise safe and fair play. By the end of Week 3, every student had learned three games they could play at recess. During Week 4, “Dr. Recess” spent two days on site, training the students and staff on several new games and the basics of intrinsic motivation. Students learned how to use “rock, paper, scissors” games to resolve conflicts, how to find friends to play games, and the proper procedures for setting up — and picking up — the equipment, which was made easier through the use of color-coding.

As stipulated by the school’s Healthy Active Youth policy, recess could no longer be taken away or used for punishment by any teacher. In addition, a pilot group of students were given FITstep™ Pro pedometers to wear; the resulting data was analyzed to determine if each recess zone provides students with equal opportunities for being active. The school also hired a recess coach to visit every few weeks and teach the students new games.

Takeaway: Having the support and advocacy of the principal and her administration team has been instrumental in the program’s success, notes Shoaf. “As our principal’s role as program advocate grew, staff that previously were reluctant to embrace the program are now actively engaged and monitoring students,” she says. Principal Moore regularly joins Shoaf and the recess coach as they drop in on recess, noting student and staff participation on a recess evaluation form.

Results: Teachers have observed a big difference in student behavior and are experiencing far fewer problems in class following recess. Bullying has decreased dramatically, from daily occurrences last year to rare incidents. Notes Shoaf: “Jennifer Campbell, the music teacher, recently came up to me and said, ‘I don’t know what you’re doing, but it’s working. I no longer have to spend the first few minutes of every class undoing what’s gone on out on the playground. There are no fights anymore.’” The feedback from students has also been extremely positive. “Kids just love it,” continues Shoaf. “They constantly come up to me wanting to learn certain games.”

Inspired by the success in grades K-3, the Thomasville School District is now increasing the number of daily physical activity minutes in its middle schools and high schools by adding classroom games and energizers. The older students are discovering you’re never too old to go outside and play.