

Cincinnati Hebrew Day School

Elementary recess

An informational report produced at the request of
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Introduction: Who wants recess?

In many countries, including educational giants Japan and Russia, schools only schedule brief breaks between classes (Cromwell, 2009). In the United States, however, there is recess. Traditionally, recess has been iconic of American elementary education, though only 11.8% of states require it (Kann, et. al, p. 446, 2007). W. T. Harris, then U. S. Commissioner of Public Education, first introduced the idea to the National Educational Association in 1884 (Salmonowicz, 2010). Ever since, it has been many students' favorite part of the day. Accordingly, 98% of parents desire recess and physical education for their elementary-age children (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009). However, not everyone loves recess. Some students dread peer torment during unstructured time (Astor, et. al, 2001), and many officials are finding other reasons to cut it back.

In this report, I will discuss the costs and benefits of elementary recess. Recess consumes precious time, though funding to extend the school day may change how those minutes are valued. It also requires a safe playground and usually equipment, which can carry a hefty price. Potentially more costly, however, is a playground injury lawsuit. Schools must supervise recess closely to keep students safe, which is expensive as well. On the other hand, there are advantages to providing recess. While recess is exaggerated as a solution to childhood obesity, physical activity in school stimulates students to exercise after school as well. Children also behave better when they have at least 15 minutes of recess. The time lost from academics is no handicap on standardized tests.

Costs of recess

Time

In 2006, 96.8% of elementary schools set apart time for recess for at least one grade. Among those, total daily recess averaged 30.2 minutes (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). At this rate, eliminating breaks frees approximately 90 hours per year for additional instruction. Schools are reluctant to cancel recess entirely given the parental support it enjoys. Yet, under the pressure of high-stakes testing, 40% of schools have shortened it (Parker-Pope, et. al, 2009). The dynamics may change, however, as schools adjust to new legislation. The 2009 Race to the Top Program rewards schools that increase learning time by using a "longer school day, week, or year schedule," whether the extra time is used for academics, service, or physical education (U. S. Department of Education, p. 13, 2009).

Space & Equipment

Some schools, often in urban areas, conclude that they lack the resources to create a safe, productive play space. Research shows that the type of schoolyard does make a difference in what goes on there. For instance, playgrounds are used longer and more actively when there are trees on the property (Arbogast, et. al, 2009). Ideal school grounds are spacious, encompass natural habitats, include equipment to build students' strength and agility—and obviously are difficult to replicate in some environments. Overcrowding tends to force urban districts in particular to trade playground space for additional classrooms. Additionally, some inner-city schools may fear that the neighborhood is too dangerous (Barros, et. al, 2009).

Still others may simply find no money for nonessentials in a stretched budget. Yet even schools that purchase costly recreational equipment occasionally see vandalism destroy their investment overnight. At Barnes Elementary School in Kelso, Washington, vandals recently caused \$7,000 of damage to a *newly erected* play structure that took five years of fundraising and \$14,000 to build. Until it is fixed, the children must keep their distance (KPTV.com, 2010).

Lawsuits

The threat of playground injury lawsuits also worries administrators. On average, 218,851 children per year get emergency treatment for “injuries that occurred on playground equipment” (National Program for Playground Safety, 2009). Recess hospitalizations can be devastating to a school’s budget and reputation. Parents of a boy who was killed when he ran off a playground into the road received \$90,000 from Bellevue School District which had not installed a fence (Cincinnati.com, 2002).

Supervision

Schools must employ or train volunteer recess supervisors to avoid charges of negligence. Playground safety regulations have evolved to protect children: There must be at least a foot of wood chips or other cushioning material below high structures and no exposed sharp points or edges, for instance (U. S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, n. d.). Complying with these rules requires constant vigilance. Many principals restrict recess activity in an effort to keep students safe. Swing sets were removed from Portland Public Schools. “No running on the playground” has become a common rule in Broward County Florida and other places (Harding, et. al, 2006). Some administrators may conclude that recess is too risky for their schools.

Benefits of Recess

Physical Activity

Recess is sometimes hailed as the antidote to childhood obesity. However, children do not appear to exercise strenuously during recess (Ridgers, et. al, 2005). What’s more, a fifteen minute recess does not require much energy. In a study by Melville, et. al (2003), the average fifth-grader burned 46.9 calories during that time; the average first-grader used 29.6.

It is also important to recognize that not all students use recess the same way. Boys and girls participate about equally in P.E., but girls are significantly less active during recess (Sarkin, et. al, 1997). Likewise, obese adolescents are much less engaged in physical activity than their peers, particularly during unstructured play time (Bengoechea, et. al, 2010).

Actually, the average American elementary student may not be as sedentary as some believe. In a large, long-term study, over 90% of 9- and 11-year-olds achieved the recommended amount of moderate to vigorous physical activity, one hour (Bock, et. al, 2008). However, children will not necessarily meet all their exercise needs without the school’s help. When students’ physical activity is limited during the school day, they do not play more on returning home. In fact, they are less active (Dale, et. al, 2000). Recess helps children make a habit of getting up and moving.

Behavior

Ninety-six percent of principals conclude that recess has a positive impact on social development (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010). A study found that between the ages of 7 and 8, there is little cultural separation on the playground, and play groups became larger and more heterogeneous over the year. (Blatchford, et. al, 2003). Recess could support a school's goal of fostering respect for diversity.

In providing an outlet for pent-up energy, recess improves classroom behavior, too. Teachers rate students as more manageable when they receive at least 15 minutes of recess (Barros, et. al, 2009). Also, children with and without an ADHD diagnosis have fewer behavior problems on days with recess (Ridgway, et. al, 2003).

Of course, 77% of "discipline-related problems" occur during recess or lunch (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010). Some research indicates that reversing the classic lunch-recess order may help. Students eat more of their meals and show fewer behavior problems when they have recess first (Bergman, et. al, 2004).

Academics

Intuition suggests that young children need breaks to learn. Eighty percent of principals agree that recess boosts academic achievement (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010). Apparently, the opportunity to move freely improves student morale and focus, which boosts their comprehension. In fact, students who leave for recess do better on standardized tests than those who do not get a break. For example, a 2005 case-study of three Texas schools that reduced recess to provide more instructional time saw academic performance worsen and health problems increase (Strong Museum of Play, 2009). Taking time off for recess certainly does not damage elementary academic achievement.

Conclusions

Table 1 summarizes strategies that districts commonly use to maximize the benefits of recess at the minimum risk. Based on research, two ideas appear more promising. Putting recess before lunch, and purchasing less, but higher-quality equipment, helps schools be certain that what they are buying complies absolutely with consumer protection laws.

Recess is not a cure for academic or weight difficulties, and it can be expensive. However, it enjoys tremendous support from parents and principals alike who believe that recess encourages students to be more cooperative, active and attentive. Ultimately, each district must decide.

Table 1. Trade-offs of recess cost reduction strategies

KEY: ▲ = undesirable increase
 ▼ = desirable decrease

STRATEGIES:	Lawsuit costs	Equipment costs	Supervision costs	Exercise	Energy release (more attentive)
Reduce time			▼		
Reduce supervision	▲		▼		
Lower equipment quality	▲	▼			
Less equipment; only high quality	▼	▼		▼	
“No running” rules	▼		▲	▼	▼
Recess, then lunch					▲

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