

The Changing Landscape of Recess

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Abstract

With many schools across the country struggling to meet the academic demands and accountability measures issued by the federal government, many schools are using the reduction or elimination of recess breaks as a way to increase the time on task for students to achieve basic skills and academic progress. These measures are giving way to all sorts of other issues such as childhood obesity and lack of socialization skills that are having a detrimental impact on American children. This paper provides the current state of the recess movement in the country and offers suggestions for ways to advocate for recess in schools.

Keywords: recess, play, childhood obesity

Many schools have seen the increase in engaged time on topics that are to be assessed on high-stakes tests (sometimes referred to as time on task). Obviously, common sense dictates that if we want children to learn a skill, they need time to practice that skill. However, as Woolfolk (2008) and others have noted, spending more time engaged on a task does not guarantee an increase in learning. In the 20 years since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2001) passed, commonly known as No Child Left Behind, many school systems have greatly diminished recess periods in favor of more systematic instructional time in classrooms. The current average time that many children are offered a recess break is about 27 minutes of the school day. Other countries outside the US often have multiple breaks within their academic day, sometimes as much as two hours over the course of a school day. The World Health Organization advocates for at least 60 hours of activity in a week for children, but with so many cities and areas struggling with an increase in crime, so many parents are apprehensive to let their children outside to play while at home (2015). So play time and activity in school is more important than ever.

Accountability measures, known as Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) have caused more administrators to change the way they allow teachers to schedule their days in favor of more of an academic focus. The discretionary time that teachers used to have to allow the children to play is no longer their own. Furthermore, some of what Nichols and Berliner (2007) call "collateral damage" to the curriculum can take place when important activities are removed from the daily routine in order to increase time spent practicing skills or learning information that will be assessed on a high-stakes test. Frost has long argued that the emphasis on high-stakes testing has had a negative effect on all schooling for young children. Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2007) discuss the important relationship between children's play and their total development. Many schools have totally dropped free play (e.g., recess breaks), because it was thought that it was superfluous activity and took up valuable time needed to prepare children for high-stakes tests (Sindelar, 2002). Organizations such as the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE), and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) are just a few of the national and international organizations emphasizing the importance of free play through recess breaks. Nevertheless, more and more school districts are electing to eliminate recess breaks, citing safety and behavior issues, along with time on task, as key reasons for the change (Sindelar, 2002; Villaire, 2001).

Despite numerous arguments, there is no research that clearly supports diminishing recess breaks (Jarrett, 2003) NAEYC and other related professional associations have long advocated for more appropriate scheduling, including times for breaks. NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) provides teachers of young children with specific guidelines for creating optimal learning environments. Within the practices for creating a classroom environment and schedule for 3- to 5-year-olds, recommendations include providing the environment is designed to support young children's physiological needs for activity and fresh air; the daily schedule provides for alternating periods of active and quiet time; teachers plan extended periods of time

for children to participate in play projects; and opportunities for children to move freely and use large muscles are strategically planned. These examples of developmentally appropriate practices clearly can be used to support the inclusion of recess breaks in the daily routine of young children

Additionally, the authors include specific references for teachers of 6- to 8-year-olds. Bredekamp and Copple recommend that teachers of primary-age children plan alternating periods of physical activity and quiet time, although they are not as specific as when making recommendations for 3- to 5-year-old students.

Childhood obesity is another reason that children need physical activity every day. As of 2018, the prevalence of childhood obesity in 2-5 year-olds was 13.4%; for 6-11 year-olds, it increases to 20.3%, and in 12-19 year-olds, it increases to 21.9% (www.cdc.gov/obesity/dats/childhood). The more children are removed from active play, the more likely they will develop obesity which leads to many health issues over a lifespan. Moreover, children who are not offered play opportunities to negotiate socialization skills and problem solving skills, the less likely they are to be able to handle the different social challenges that come in middle school and high school. Children past elementary age are often faced with bullying situations in person and online, and without the learned skills of how to play, interact, and resolve conflicts on their own, the less likely they are to be able to adjust to these pressures in their advancing school years. Time at recess provides for these active play experiences, and offers children the chance to burn calories actively and solve problems on their own.

Teachers should join with parents to continue to advocate for longer and more frequent recess breaks as a vital part of the school curriculum. Currently 11 percent of recess periods occur before lunch, leaving the afternoon to a complete academic focus (2017). Teachers need to educate the parents/families in their schools, sharing the information they have gleaned about the importance of recess and how these breaks are slowly changing in an effort to meet state requirements. The trend does seem to be making a shift in favor of recess in recent years. In the mid 2000's, over 40 percent of schools had greatly diminished or abolished recess. As of 2017, according to the CDC, only 10 percent of schools had no scheduled recess breaks within the school day.

(www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/pdf/Recess_Data_Brief); so the tide is shifting. And 54 percent of school systems now prevent teachers from using the elimination of recess as a punishment for bad behavior or to complete work.

It is necessary for teachers to become active participants of the parent/teacher associations in their schools. Families should be encouraged to join with the teachers to encourage the establishment of school district policies that require recess breaks as a necessary part of the curriculum. In school districts across the United States, as vocal parents have been quite successful in getting the school board policies they want, School board officials and elected officials will typically listen to groups of parents.

In the National Association for the Education of Young Children Code of Ethical Conduct, early childhood professionals have an ethical, moral obligation to become strong advocates for the rights of young children to have the highest quality learning and social experiences in schools. Recess breaks during the school day are just one way in which those experiences can be had. Adults can take breaks for coffee, conversation, lunches, and other nonessential tasks; yet, young children, who are most in need of periodic breaks, get few or none. We often hear teachers say, "What can I do?" Alone, you may not be able to do much, but you can be the voice needed to bring about change in your school or district. You can involve the community in efforts to save recess breaks. You could also invite a reporter from the local newspaper or television station into your classroom to share the action research you are conducting. "The Demise of Recess Breaks: A Trio of Local Moms Fights Back With a Little Book," an article posted on OrlandoSentinel.com (Postal, 2008), demonstrates how the press was used to widely publicize efforts to reinstate recess breaks in Florida schools. The three mothers cited in the article used a self-published and downloadable book in their attempt to bring attention to children's need for recess breaks. Actual photographs of a beautiful, well-furnished, empty playground were used to emphasize the tragic waste of both physical and financial resources. This little book attempts to bring to light two important issues. Not only are children being deprived of the opportunity to use this wonderful playground, but taxpayer dollars used to build the playground are going unused. Early childhood professionals could use similar strategies to share results of the action research being conducted in their own classrooms. Teachers can write a short article explaining the results of the action research projects, post it on the school or district website, and/or submit it to the local newspaper.

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