

The End of Recess

Higher standards are squeezing out playtime at schools throughout the country. Some educators not on

By Ron Schachter
August 2005

It used to be that the biggest problems of recess were scraping your knee or having a run-in with the schoolyard bully. Nowadays the greatest risk may be to your school's Adequate Yearly Progress rating.

As state and federal standards have been ratcheted up, the minutes allotted to the traditional practice of recess has shrunk in 40 percent of school districts around the country, according to recent surveys. Some newly built elementary schools do not even have playgrounds.

School and district administrators, meanwhile, have been performing a balancing act between rising academic demands and the needs of students to have breaks from their increasing classroom rigors.

The cutback of elementary recess last fall to just 10 minutes a day in Peabody, Mass., triggered national headlines and drew angry protests from parents.

"When I was hired, my charge was to improve student achievement, and I thought I needed to look at a variety of angles," says Nadine Binkley, Peabody's first-year superintendent. "In these times, when schools are being held to very high standards, there aren't many places to look for additional time."

" Schools are being held to very high standards; there aren't many places to look for additional time." -Nadine Binkley, superintendent, Peabody (Mass.) Public Schools

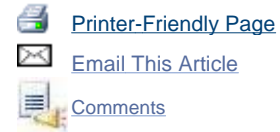
It didn't help that Peabody's schools let out at 2:10 p.m., almost an hour earlier than most Massachusetts schools.

"I would have loved to expand the school day," Binkley says, "We had talked about having more time, but the school committee and the mayor felt that the cost was prohibitive. Plus we would have had to negotiate any change with the teachers' union, and we had just gone through a very heated negotiation. So we were forced to look inside the school day."

What had been an hour-long block divided into 20-minute segments for lunch, recess, and supervised reading became two half-hour blocks--one for additional classroom instruction and one for lunch and recess. The reduction in free time for students was even more noticeable because recess in the previous year often had extended informally into the time slot reserved for reading.

Rushing Play

Not anymore. On one late spring morning behind the K-5 McCarthy Memorial Elementary School in Peabody, the second and third graders crowd the playground. Some play kickball on a little-league-sized baseball diamond, others fill the monkey bars and slides, and still others cluster on the adjoining blacktop. There are a lot of noisy shouts and loud, running footsteps from the children until their 10 minutes are up, when they begin an orderly



march to the lunchroom.

"If we could give these kids more time, we would," says McCarthy Principal Amy Sullivan. Sullivan has students go to recess first so that won't wolf down their lunches in order to get outside more quickly.

"Since that first week, we've really just adjusted," Sullivan says, although in some of Peabody's other elementary schools, loud objections by parents made the recess issue more political. Among their criticisms was that in the colder months, just putting on and taking off outdoor gear would consume most of the recess time.

At the McCarthy school, though, even the field day at the end of the past school year carried the message that there's no time to waste. "We still had a field day, but it was a 'math and play' field day," Sullivan explains. Teachers focused on areas in which students needed help and built outdoor activities around them, such as measuring the perimeter of the field.

"We're weak in measurement," Sullivan notes, "so the students also measured their jumps. They still had a great time, and they were learning."

"There's a feeling that kids should be given time to be kids," says Peabody Superintendent Binkley, "but they're also going to be part of a changing society, and we need to make sure that they have the skills to do that."

Binkley adds that in the age of NCLB, preparing these students academically has become even more critical. "We have one school here that did not meet its AYP for the past two years, and there are great implications when that happens. We had to send out a letter to every parent at that school saying, 'If you would like your child to go to another school, we would be glad to arrange that.' Do you know what a slap in the face that is for teachers?"

However, advocates of recess have been holding schools to a different standard and are taking a more forceful approach to preserving, and expanding, what's been historically considered the fourth "R."

Hidden Lessons of Recess

Don't sell recess short, warns Audrey Skrupskelis, the president of the American Association of the Child's Right to Play. Her organization recommends a half-hour break for children both in the morning and in the afternoon.

"There's a lot of development that goes on during recess," says Skrupskelis. "It gives children the opportunity to take control of their lives. This is where they have the opportunity to learn life skills: How are we going to solve conflict? How are we going to deal with bullies?"

There's also no need to build extra instruction into playtime, she argues. "If you observe children carefully, they take the concepts they learned in the classroom and try to practice them without the supervision of the teacher. They'll be playing in the sand pile, and one will say, 'I have two buckets of sand and you have three.'"

Skrupskelis adds that teachers can better learn about the emotional state and potential problems of their students by watching them in action on the playground. And recess fills a particularly pressing need in light of dwindling physical education time.

*" Recess gives children the opportunity to take control of their lives." -
Audrey Skrupskelis, president, American Association of the Child's Right
to Play*

"For some kids, recess is almost the only opportunity for them to get regular exercise," she points out.

Olga Jarrett teaches early childhood education at Georgia State University and has researched the effects of time spent on the playground. She studied two fourth-grade classes, both of which had physical education classes three times a week, but only one of which had recess.

"We found that the students who had the recess were much more on task and less fidgety," says Jarrett. "When we interviewed the children, some of these fourth graders were actually talking about the respect involved in their being able to make the choices during recess."

"I think it's a false idea that if you keep kids in their seats, they are absorbing what you are teaching." Jarrett continues. "Brain studies, as well as practical studies at schools, have indicated that you're giving up something if children do not have the chance to have some down time. They cannot continue to concentrate. That's not too surprising because research on adults has found the same thing."

Fighting for Playtime

That there are two sides to the recess story is apparent even within school districts. In Lincoln, Neb., for example all of the elementary schools provide a combined lunch/recess break. An additional 20-minute recess during the day is optional.

And at Pyrtle Elementary School, Principal Ann Jablonski is holding on to it tightly, even though she sees the concern growing among some of her fellow principals in Lincoln. "They're worried about their test scores," she observes. "They feel like, 'We can't waste a minute.' It's getting that intense, and they feel like more time in the classroom--more time on task--is going to produce those scores. And I think it might have the opposite effect.

"Kids actually need a break. Adults get breaks at their jobs, and our day is so packed with curriculum. Sometimes I'm just appalled that we don't speak up more often and say, 'No! Enough's enough.' The kids are missing a part of their childhood. And what's wrong with play? When we say 'play,' it's as if they are wasting time." Jablonski worries that her students are not developing enough interpersonal skills in the classroom. "I'm seeing kindergarteners and first and second graders not being able to play with each other and interact," she laments. "It's a lost art. They're used to us doing the planning. And I don't think it serves them well down the road."

"I lived for recess when I was in school," admits Russ Reckewey, the principal of Lincoln's Kahoa Elementary School, but he sees a different reality today. "I think there's still a great value in recess," he says, "but I also see great value in having an educated child."

So four years ago, Reckewey eliminated the optional recess at the urging of his teachers, who were concerned that it was cutting too deeply into their class time.

"If you have a 15-minute recess, by time you've refocused the kids--along with the Nebraska weather and having to remove coats and boots--it's really 25 minutes before you're back into your next instructional area," calculates Reckewey, who says the reclaimed time adds up to two weeks more instruction per year.

"And it's paid off," he emphasizes. Reckewey points to the latest results on the Metropolitan Achievement Test--which show 3rd grade reading scores up from 69.5 during the 2000-01 school year to 79 in 2004-2005. In math, the third grade scores have risen from 71.7 to 88.4. And Reckewey touts similar results over that time for Kahoa's fifth graders.

Afterschool Exercise Decreasing, Too

In Lincoln, as in most of the country, schools are facing the additional pressure of dwindling time for physical education. "We've had to cut back on physical education classes to do all of our other requirements," says Pyrtle

Elementary's Jablonski. "Over the past two years, I've noticed our kids getting heavier and heavier. I watched them at field day, and they were very winded."

That news comes as no surprise to Marybell Avery, Lincoln's curriculum specialist for health and education, who has seen a rise in Type 2 diabetes. She notes that almost one-third of the district's children are overweight. Avery is also the former president of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, a group that advocates for student exercise and recommends 150 minutes of physical activity weekly for elementary school students.

"We're way behind at all levels," she concedes, noting that her district's elementary and middle schools offer less than half that time and that the high schools have recently cut physical education requirements by a quarter. She adds that NCLB is casting a shadow over what physical education remains. Since PE is not presently included as a core subject, it is at greater risk for cuts, Avery points out, and she has already seen the loss of funds for staff training in her department.

Lois Brink, a landscape architect who has designed almost three dozen playgrounds for Denver's elementary schools, sees a strong link between playground time and physical fitness. "If we have an epidemic of obesity and diabetes in children," she says, "we can't take away the recess they already have. You've got to create a culture to sustain playgrounds and prove at a policy level the value of physical education and recess."

To that end Brink, who is also an associate professor at the University of Colorado at Denver, is using a \$150,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to study the connection between physical activity and student behavior and social skills.

In the meantime, administrators strapped for time are hoping that children make up any deficits in physical activity on their own. Peabody, Mass., Superintendent Binkley says that the short school day should leave students more time to run around and play afterwards. In Lincoln, Principal Russ Reckaway is counting on student participation in community programs, from the YMCA to athletic leagues.

Educators such as Avery have their doubts, though. "For one thing, children aren't getting the physical activity outside of school that they used to," she says. "And you can point to sedentary practices such as watching TV or playing on the computer." She adds that safety issues often keep children from playing outside the house and even walking to and from school. And the prospects for the district's underprivileged children participating in youth sports outside of school are even grimmer because they often lack the economic resources and the transportation to take advantage.

Carving Out More Time

Still, over the past year the movement to preserve and even expand recess has made notable strides. Michigan and Virginia are the only states to mandate recess in public schools. Earlier this year, the Atlanta Public Schools--one of the first districts to eliminate recess during the standards movement of the 1980's--restored a 15-minute "unstructured break" on days when physical education is not offered.

Atlanta school officials are careful not to use the "R" word and are standing by the progress that schools have made with the extra instructional time. Janice Monk Reardon, the district's policy analyst, points to rising test scores and a growing number of students enrolled in higher-level courses. "We're an urban school system facing so many challenges, and we're making strides," Reardon says. "So we can't take our eyes off the academic prize."

And some elementary schools, such as the Cabot School in Newton, Mass., even are adding time to recess periods. At Cabot this fall, the 30-minute lunch break will increase by 10 minutes. "The lunch recess was rushed.

It was short. It was fast. And it was furious," explains Principal Marilynne Quarcoo. "I said, 'Let's extend that recess time and figure out as creative people how to get everything else done.' And I told my teachers, 'You really have permission to take kids outside.'"

Quarcoo urges Cabot teachers to take innovative approaches to the curriculum--such as combining learning objectives in language arts and science or using math texts during guided reading--so that students can meet rising standards without losing time on the playground.

That approach has resonated with first grade Cabot teacher Allison Mixter. "Teachers here feel a relief that recess is allowed and supported. We were worrying, 'Should we be doing something else?' "

"We should never succumb to believing that all we do is instruct children in a body of knowledge," answers Quarcoo. "There's more to school than that."

In Peabody, meanwhile, McCarthy Principal Amy Sullivan has tried to compensate for the lost free time by encouraging teachers to build in more kinesthetic activities to the curriculum and to have students move around to different learning centers throughout the classroom.

"I have one teacher who has her kids go through different motions and exercises during class to get the wiggles out," notes Sullivan.

And in Lincoln, the district has joined the "Walking School Bus" program, which was designed by the national Centers for Disease Control and provides adult supervision so youngsters can walk safely to and from school instead of riding the bus or getting a lift. Elementary classrooms also are making increasing use of the "Brain Breaks" available online from the Michigan State Department of Education.

One such exercise, titled "Clue," turns the study of storylines or history time lines into scavenger hunts around the classroom or building. Another activity, "The States," teaches American geography by having students form a living map by arranging themselves in the correct place of the state to which they are assigned.

Ron Schachter is a contributing editor.

Related Information

Recess v. Gym Much of the debate over exercise treats physical education and recess as the same sort of break for children. But while both accomplish the task of freeing children from behind their desks, there are very real differences between gym and recess. Physical education is a planned instructional program with specific objectives, says Dolly Lambdin, president of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. This time aims to improve students' fitness while laying the groundwork for a physically active lifestyle. Recess, on the other hand, is unstructured time that allows students to learn how to choose games, get along with each other and socialize with friends, she says. Physical education does not replace the need for children to have recess breaks, says Lambdin. "Time for recess may enhance overall learning in the classroom. ... In a well-designed recess period, children learn how to cooperate, compete constructively, assume leader/follower roles and resolve conflicts. Play is an essential element of children's social development." These thoughts are echoed in a report by the Council on Physical Education for Children. This group calls for at least one hour of physical activity each day for children from 6 to 11. It states, "Recess should not be viewed as a reward, but a necessary educational support component for all children." **Legislating Recess** The backlash against cutting recess seems to be hitting high tide. The reasons why recess has disappeared from school days remain, but recently more people, from politicians to parents, are trying to mandate more time for play in schools. U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, (R-Texas), has introduced legislation to amend NCLB to provide a national guideline for minimum standards for health and fitness in schools. Two states, Michigan and Virginia, have already mandated time for recess statewide. A bill that would have legislated 20 minutes of play per day for all Connecticut schools passed this year, but was vetoed by Gov. Jodi Rell because she said it would usurp local control. **Why the push?** The two main reasons are the growing obesity problem in the United States and parents' demands to restore the playtime they feel their children need during each school day. The need for children to have daily physical exercise has been known for a long time; in 1996 a landmark Surgeon General's report, *Physical Activity and Health*, called for requiring daily physical education for all students K-12. In 2000, a report co-written by then Education Secretary Richard Riley stated:

"Our nation's young people are, in large measure, inactive, unfit, and increasingly overweight. This report should stimulate action to make sure that daily physical activity for young people becomes the norm in our nation." A report by the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports states that half of U.S. children aged 12 to 21 get no vigorous physical activity. The percentage of high school students who have phys ed daily decreased from 42 percent in 1991 to 32 percent by 2001, while just 17 percent of middle schools and high schools require daily physical activity for all children. Meanwhile, almost one of every three children between 6 and 19 are obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control. That's triple the rate just 20 years ago. Armed with this information, parents are increasingly asking to restore some activity, either through recess or physical education, to their children's daily school routine. A report from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education reports that more than three of four parents said more phys ed time in schools could help control the obesity problem in children. But more than nine of ten parents said they thought daily physical exercise would help children academically.--Wayne D'Orio