

Give Kids a Break: The Importance of Recess in Childhood Education

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*The best way to improve children's performance in the classroom may be to take them out of it.*¹

I. INTRODUCTION

Recess is defined as “a break period, typically outdoors, for children.”²

Compared to the rest of day, recess is a time when children have the freedom to choose “what they want to do and with whom.”³ While recess has long been considered an integral part of the school day, it has come under attack in the past thirty years, especially with the passage of No Child Left Behind (“NCLB”) in 2001.⁴ Although opponents of recess argue that it poses safety issues and that more instructional time is needed, these arguments pale in comparison to the multitude of benefits that recess provides to children. Research has demonstrated that in addition to important health benefits, recess increases a child’s ability to learn and develop socially.⁵ The many advantages of recess highlight the necessity of keeping it alive, despite the pressure to cut back or even eliminate it at schools across the country.

In the late 1980s, some schools began cutting back on recess to provide more time for academics.⁶ The trend accelerated with the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001.⁷ With so much pressure and focus on preparing children for testing into the next grade, there was less time to incorporate physical education or recess into the

¹ Tara Parker-Pope, *The 3 R's? A Fourth is Crucial, Too: Recess*, NEW YORK TIMES, Feb. 24, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/24/health/24well.html>.

² Olga S. Jarrett, *Recess in Elementary School: What Does the Research Say?*, ERIC DIGEST (Jul. 2002).

³ *Id.*

⁴ Olga S. Jarrett and Sandra Waite-Stupiansky, *Recess—It's Indispensable!*, YOUNG CHILDREN, Sept. 2009, at 66, available at <http://www.naeyc.org/yc/columns>.

⁵ *See id.* at 67.

⁶ *Id.* at 66.

⁷ *Id.*

curriculum.⁸ One in five principals report that the annual yearly progress requirements of NCLB have led to a decrease in recess.⁹ In 2008, the Center on Education Policy reported that since the enactment of NCLB, twenty percent of school systems decreased time for recess, averaging cuts of fifty minutes per week.¹⁰ The movement is particularly widespread among high-poverty, high-minority, and urban schools.¹¹ Children who attend these schools are far more likely than other children to get no recess at all, a phenomenon known as the “recess gap.”¹² Despite the assumption that more time in the classroom will lead to better test scores, there is no research to support this notion.¹³ However, there is plenty of evidence that recess benefits children in cognitive, social, and physical ways.¹⁴ These benefits are most needed and least likely to be obtained in urban school districts, including Chicago, and prove that it is an institution worth saving.

II. BENEFITS OF RECESS

Recess continues to have many supporters. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that children receive about an hour of exercise each day.¹⁵ The National Association for Sport and Physical Education suggests elementary school children get at least twenty minutes of recess daily.¹⁶ The American Academy of

⁸ See Caralee Adams, *Recess Makes Kids Smarter*, INSTRUCTOR MAGAZINE, available at <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3755758>.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 66.

¹¹ Patte Barth, *Time Out: Is Recess in Danger?*, CTR. FOR PUB. EDUC., Aug. 6, 2008, <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Organizing-a-school?Time-out-Is-recess-in-danger/default.aspx>.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Adams, *supra* note 8.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Danielle Cadet Medill, *No Recess at School? Make Room for Activity Elsewhere*, NWIPARENT MAGAZINE, Feb. 19, 2011, available at http://www.nwitimes.com/niche/nwiparent/wellness/article_6cc891a2-1b32-5beb-aa3d-eaac134d6332.html.

¹⁶ Adams, *supra* note 8.

Pediatrics reports that play is essential to children's development.¹⁷ Eight out of ten principals polled in 2009 said recess has a positive impact on learning.¹⁸ Finally, according to a survey conducted by the National Parent Teacher Association, three out of four parents believe recess should be mandatory.¹⁹ These supporters recognize the invaluable role that recess plays in a child's development. Children who have recess are benefited academically, socially, and physically.²⁰ These advantages highlight the importance of maintaining recess at schools.

A. Academic Benefits

When children are given time to play and be physically active, they perform better in the classroom.²¹ Breaks in routine are essential for both satisfaction and alertness.²² Several studies have demonstrated that time spent playing at recess improves academic achievement.²³ Cognitive benefits include improved memory, more focused attention, development of more brain connections, better attitudes, and slightly improved test scores.²⁴ Despite the opposition's contention that more time in the classroom leads to better test scores, the research shows that recess improves children's ability to focus and leads to higher test scores.²⁵ Medical evidence supports the fact that exercise stimulates serotonin in the brain, which creates a sense of general well-being and allows students to

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Adams, *supra* note 8.

²⁰ Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 67.

²¹ Dani McClain, *School Recess Cutbacks Overstated*, JOURNAL SENTINEL, Sept. 12, 2008, <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/32540469.html>.

²² Jarrett, *supra* note 2.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Adams, *supra* note 8; Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 67.

²⁵ Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 67.

focus more easily.²⁶ Recess also provides children a chance to develop and improve motor skills in a way that most classroom activities cannot do.²⁷ Children are full of energy and need an opportunity to unwind in order to focus in the classroom.²⁸

Moreover, recess is associated with better classroom behavior.²⁹ In a study conducted by the Departments of Pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Children's Hospital at Montefiore, and Rose F. Kennedy Center in the Bronx, teachers' ratings of classroom behavior were better for children with recess than for those without or with a minimal break.³⁰ Students were less attentive and worked less efficiently when confined to their classrooms, thus indicating that recess is an important element of classroom management and behavior guidance.³¹ While many educational experts argue that the key to success is academic learning and that school should be fully devoted to academics, physical activity has proven to help children enjoy school more and perform better.³² Providing children with an outlet such as recess is therefore key to their success in the classroom.³³

B. Social Benefits

Recess gives children the chance to develop social skills that are necessary to become competent adults.³⁴ First, it provides a valuable opportunity for children to

²⁶ Julie Hubbard, *Many Low-Income, Minority Students Get Little or No Recess*, Oct. 14, 2008, <http://www.macon.com/2008/10/14/v-print/491586/many-low-income-minority-students.html>.

²⁷ NICK BAZALIAKI ET AL., NO RECESS—NO WAY! TAKE BACK YOUR TIME 3 (Ctr. For Religion, Ethics and Soc. Policy, Cornell Univ.), available at http://www.timeday.org/pdf/recess_ban_paper.pdf.

²⁸ Hubbard, *supra* note 26..

²⁹ Romina M. Barros, Ellen J. Silver & Ruth E.K. Stein, *School Recess and Group Classroom Behavior*, 123 PEDIATRICS 431, 431 (Feb. 2009).

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.* at 435.

³² BAZALIAKI ET AL., *supra* note 27, at 3.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Recess*, WIKIPEDIA.COM, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recess_\(break\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recess_(break)) (last visited Apr. 23, 2011).

engage in social interactions with other children.³⁵ For some students, it may be their only opportunity, as many classrooms allow very little interaction with other children.³⁶ Recess is one of the few times during the day when children are free to exhibit a wide range of social skills such as sharing, cooperation, communication, and problem-solving.³⁷ In the open setting that recess provides, children are free to make choices, exercise leadership, develop games, and resolve conflicts.³⁸ When children play together, they figure out a way to resolve their differences, a skill that will serve them well throughout their lives.³⁹ Opponents often argue that physical education can be substituted for recess and provides the same benefits.⁴⁰ However, these benefits are unique to recess because although physical education offers its own advantages, it does not afford children the same opportunity to develop social skills, make decisions, and figure out what is fair.⁴¹ Children's activity levels are higher during recess than during physical education.⁴² While physical education is also important, it cannot operate as a substitute because students need unstructured time where they can be creative and make up their own rules.⁴³

Second, because recess is one of the only times in the school day when children can interact freely with each other, it is a time during which adults can observe children's social behaviors.⁴⁴ Seeing how students interact can help teachers better understand

³⁵ Jarrett, *supra* note 2.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *No Recess Policies Being Implemented in U.S. School Districts*, <http://library.adoption.com/articles/no-recess-policies-being-implemented-in-u.s.-school-districts.html>.

³⁸ Jarrett, *supra* note 2; Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 67.

³⁹ *No Recess Policies Being Implemented in U.S. School Districts*, *supra* note 37.

⁴⁰ Jarrett, *supra* note 2.

⁴¹ Adams, *supra* note 8; Jarrett, *supra* note 2.

⁴² Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 67.

⁴³ BAZALIAKI ET AL., *supra* note 27, at 2.

⁴⁴ Jarrett, *supra* note 2.

behavior and intervene when necessary.⁴⁵ Teachers get to know their students better while supervising recess, which “can be useful in developing curriculum and in preventing bullying.”⁴⁶ Free time also provides a nice change of pace for the teachers as well as the children.⁴⁷ Recess therefore provides valuable social benefits to both students and teachers.

C. Health Benefits

Physical activity is crucial to the development of a child.⁴⁸ Childhood health problems caused by inactivity or underactivity characterize a growing dilemma in the United States.⁴⁹ Inactivity is associated with the epidemic of childhood obesity, which leads to health problems including high blood pressure and high cholesterol.⁵⁰ Inactivity is also associated with the increase in childhood heart disease and type 2 diabetes.⁵¹ Recent surveys conducted by the American Association for the Child’s Right to Play show that “forty percent of five to eight year-olds have significant cardiovascular disease risk factors such as obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and an inactive lifestyle.”⁵²

Recess gives children the opportunity to engage in a healthy amount of physical activity.⁵³ Studies have shown that elementary school children engage in physical activity the majority of the time during recess, with vigorous physical activity occurring

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 68.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *See* Jarrett, *supra* note 2.

⁴⁹ Barros, Silver & Stein, *supra* note 29, at 435.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 66.

⁵² BAZALIAKI ET AL., *supra* note 27, at 4.

⁵³ Jarrett, *supra* note 2.

for a significant portion of that time.⁵⁴ Although those in favor of eliminating recess argue that children can simply exercise after school, research suggests that this rarely happens.⁵⁵ For many children, recess is one of the few times during the day when they are outside playing.⁵⁶ If children do not get the chance to be active during the school day, they do not tend to compensate after school.⁵⁷ In fact, children tend to be less active after school when they have no recess or physical education, whereas children who are active during the day are more active after school.⁵⁸ Both recess and physical education are recommended to ensure a healthy and active child.⁵⁹

Recess also provides an opportunity for children to relieve stress through play.⁶⁰ Being cooped up in a classroom all day is not healthy for a child's physical and emotional development.⁶¹ Some go so far as to suggest that no recess during the day is almost inhumane because children are confined to a classroom for hours each day.⁶² The many health benefits that recess provides illustrate that no recess policies are contrary to the physical and learning needs of elementary school students.⁶³ Eliminating recess worsens the already serious problems threatening childhood health.

III. A LOOK AT RECESS IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The city of Chicago provides the perfect backdrop in which to examine the recess debate. In the Chicago Public Schools, "nutrition and fitness have taken a back seat to

⁵⁴ *See id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ BAZALIAKI ET AL., *supra* note 27, at 4.

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*; Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 67.

⁵⁹ Jarrett, *supra* note 2.

⁶⁰ BAZALIAKI ET AL., *supra* note 27, at 4.

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *No Recess Policies Being Implemented in U.S. School Districts*, *supra* note 37.

⁶³ *Id.*

test scores and academic achievement.”⁶⁴ Elementary school students work full days with few breaks and little time for lunch.⁶⁵ According to data published by the Healthy Schools Campaign in February 2011, only thirty-seven percent of Chicago public schools provide time in the day for recess and physical education.⁶⁶

In 1973, the vast majority of Chicago Public Schools moved to a closed campus model that eliminated a morning recess, an afternoon recess, and a lengthy lunch.⁶⁷ The new model left kids with no recess and a twenty-minute lunch.⁶⁸ While the changes were made to address concerns about children who went home during the lunch break and either never returned or encountered problems, they have remained in place due to the pressure to prepare children to test well.⁶⁹ While schools focus on academics and getting certain test scores, parents are left with the responsibility of ensuring that their children receive the proper amount of exercise.⁷⁰ Unfortunately, this does not always happen, especially for children whose parents work full time.⁷¹

As a result, recess advocates are pushing to bring recess back to Chicago public schools.⁷² Helping to lead the charge is Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis, who favors having teachers move their lunch from the end of the day to the middle, allowing children to have recess: “Recess is good for kids and it’s good for

⁶⁴ Natalie Pardo, *All Work, Less Play in Public Schools*, THE CHICAGO REPORTER, Oct. 1, 2007, http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/Cover_Stories/d/All_Work,_Less_Play_in_Public_Schools.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ Danielle Cadet Medill, *supra* note 15.

⁶⁷ Rosalind Rossi, *New Effort to Get Recess Back at Chicago Public Grammar Schools*, SUN TIMES, Apr. 6, 2011, available at <http://www.suntimes.com/news/education/4680337-418/new-effort-to-get-recess-back-at-chicago-pulic-grammar-schools.html>.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ Danielle Cadet Medill, *supra* note 15.

⁷¹ *See generally id.*

⁷² Rossi, *supra* note 67.

teachers... That's a win-win."⁷³ Although the switch would not add any instructional time, Lewis notes that "research indicates it would help kids learn better during the class time they do have."⁷⁴

Unfortunately, these advocates face an uphill battle. The recess gap in Chicago is particularly wide and many schools do not even have outdoor space for children to play.⁷⁵ While schools with the lowest percentage of poor and minority children are more likely to get recess, those with a high percentage remain without.⁷⁶ As Margaret Harrigan, professor of education at DePaul University, noted, "Schools have decided that the way to deal with predominately poor, minority populations is to lock them up."⁷⁷

Although the Illinois School Code requires that all schools provide some sort of daily physical activity, schools are given wide latitude in terms of compliance.⁷⁸ Daily recess and physical education classes are not required under the Code.⁷⁹ Due to a budget deficit and limited resources, it is difficult to monitor the schools and ensure their compliance.⁸⁰

Despite these challenges, advocates hope a "perfect storm is brewing" to bring recess back to elementary schools in Chicago.⁸¹ Both parents and educators recognize the importance of recess and are willing to fight to get it back.⁸² Although opponents argue that recess will take valuable time away from academics and test preparation, the break afforded by recess will give children the energy and focus they need to perform

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ Pardo, *supra* note 64.

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ *Id.*

⁸⁰ *See id.*

⁸¹ Rossi, *supra* note 67.

⁸² *See generally id.*

better in the classroom. This is especially important for children in Chicago public schools, who face both academic and health problems.⁸³

IV. CONCLUSION

Play and down time are as important to a child's academic experience as reading, science, and math.⁸⁴ Recess is important not only for learning, but for social development and health.⁸⁵ Although opponents of recess argue that more instruction is necessary and that recess does nothing to improve academic performance, there is no research to support the notion that keeping children in the classroom longer helps them academically.⁸⁶ On the other hand, there is "plenty of evidence that recess benefits children in cognitive, social-emotional, and physical ways."⁸⁷ While opponents also point to safety and liability concerns, these are not sufficient to outweigh the many advantages that recess provides to children. Free play is healthy and essential for helping children reach important developmental milestones.⁸⁸ Despite the pressure to cut back on recess to allow more instructional time, schools need to remember that recess is a basic need and that policies against recess discriminate against children.⁸⁹ The battle in Chicago highlights the importance of keeping recess alive. Preserving recess is necessary for the well-being of children, both inside and outside of the classroom.

⁸³ See Pardo, *supra* note 64.

⁸⁴ Parker-Pope, *supra* note 1.

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ *No Recess Policies Being Implemented in U.S. School Districts*, *supra* note 37; Adams, *supra* note 8.

⁸⁷ Adams, *supra* note 8.

⁸⁸ Barros, Silver & Stein, *supra* note 29, at 431.

⁸⁹ Jarrett and Waite-Stupiansky, *supra* note 4, at 68.