

## RECESS REBOOT:

### Effective Planning and Implementation Strategies for Classroom Teachers

By Jennifer Heidorn and Brent Heidorn

**T**here is growing concern regarding the physical activity opportunities provided for youth, specifically those in K–12 schools. In some districts, recess requirements are being mandated to encourage more classroom breaks and physical activity for children. Some districts are even doing more (such as Eagle Mountain Elementary School in Fort Worth, TX) by providing four recess periods for kindergarten and first-grade students. Unfortunately, these trends are not the norm for most students in elementary schools, as only 21 states specifically require physical activity or recess during the school day (State of Obesity, 2017). With obesity continually on the rise, additional efforts to increase physical activity among youth are needed.



In 2007, Georgia had the second highest childhood obesity rate in the nation (Georgia Department of Public Health, 2013). Although that rate has since declined, it was not due to a requirement for physical activity or recess. In 2017, Georgia House Bill 273 was introduced to provide a new provision within the “Quality Basic Education Act” specifying daily recess for students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The Senate passed the bill with amendments. Because it is not a mandate, schools are only encouraged to adopt it. All but two of the 180 school districts have also signed flexibility contracts. These contracts permit schools to waive the requirement (Tagami, 2018). In many schools, recess is canceled during poor weather conditions, when indoor space is not available, and when recess is scheduled on the same day as physical education class.

Recess in K–12 schools (not only in Georgia) continues to dwindle in many settings, especially due to minimal support from legislation and school administrators. However, recess is needed and should be included as part of the whole-child approach to further enhance the educational experience for all students. This article provides guidance for physical education teachers and elementary classroom teachers for scheduling and managing recess to ensure maximal use of time and enhance enjoyment and benefits for students.

## The Need for Recess

For many students, sitting at their desks with minimal opportunities to move is the norm during a typical school day. Some exceptions include restroom and lunch breaks. This type of school day is all too common, even when numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of physical activity, including enhanced academic performance and learning (Amin et al., 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2010; Elliot, Erwin, Hall, & Heidorn, 2013; Erwin, Fedewa, Beighle, & Ahn, 2012; Michael, Merlo, Basch, Wentzel, & Wechsler, 2015; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). Movement helps learning “settle,” because covering lots of material without a necessary break often results in a limited amount of absorbed information. As an example, one might compare a student’s mind at the start of each day to an empty water glass. Throughout the day, teachers continue filling each student’s glass with water (facts, figures, formulas, etc.). There eventually comes a tipping point for the glass. Unfortunately, many teachers continue pouring more knowledge (i.e., content) into each glass and assume there is still room. In all likelihood, however, the glass just overflows, resulting in class content and time being wasted, because students can only absorb so much. To combat this challenge, recess provides an opportunity to “empty the glass” and provides more room for student learning.

Recess also provides an opportunity for students to play. Play is an element of social development helping children practice concepts like justice, fairness, cooperation, friendship, negotiation, creativity, conflict resolution, loyalty and social rules (Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2010). Recess provides children with an opportunity to learn how to get along with one another through social interactions that do not necessar-

ily happen in the typical classroom environment. Educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) indicated that play is a predominant component in childhood development. With “whole-child development” initiatives in education (i.e., under the *Every Student Succeeds Act*), recess is a perfect companion for early development.

## Recess Defined

Recess is a “period of time when students are encouraged to be physically active and engage with their peers in activities of their choice” (CDC & SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2017, p. 2). Given the few choices children have in school regarding assignments, tests and highly structured learning, recess gives children a full opportunity for choice (within reason, of course). Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, physical education and recess have completely different purposes, content and structure. Different from recess and physical activity, a quality physical education program “provides learning opportunities, appropriate instruction, [and] meaningful and challenging content for all children” and should include essential components identified through policy and environment, curriculum, appropriate instruction and student assessment. Although time for physical education is allotted in schools and provides children with a break from classroom-based learning, quality physical education should be appropriately structured and emphasize the five SHAPE America National Standards for K–12 Physical Education (SHAPE America, 2014). Recess opportunities, however, should primarily provide physical activity, which includes numerous well-documented benefits.

## Recess Management

Recess should be unstructured, but rules and guidelines are needed to maximize participation for students and to ensure their safety. Teachers should enforce recess expectations with students at the beginning of the school year, similar to how they inform students of other routines, like submitting assignments, using the restroom, or eating lunch in the cafeteria. Physical education teachers can help classroom teachers with these concepts and offer management strategies during transitions for successful experiences. Games that can be played during recess could be taught in physical education classes early and periodically throughout the academic year.

Anaheim Elementary School District in California developed a “54321” strategy to teach children about what to do during recess and to encourage them to be physically active and use their time appropriately. The specific strategy consists of the following:

- 5: No more than five students should be in a line at one time to play a game or wait for equipment.
- 4: Think of four activities to play or do before recess starts. Teachers could have students turn to a peer and tell him/her what they plan to do as a ticket out the door.

- 3: Students may only win a total of three consecutive games before they need to move on to something else and let other students have a turn.
- 2: Children should take only two minutes to use the restroom and/or get water.
- 1: Use one game of rock/paper/scissors to settle a game dispute, whether the ball was in or out, etc.

Scheduling recess outdoors should be encouraged. According to Dongmei, Klaus and Soren (2013), sunlight stimulates the pineal gland. This part of the brain helps regulate one's biological clock, is vital to the immune system, triggers vitamin D for bone growth, and may reduce nearsightedness. According to ophthalmologists, eye growth occurs when children are five and nine years old. According to research, exposure to 14 hours of sunlight each week assists with proper eye development (Nutt, 2014). Researchers also perceive that sunlight increases academic learning, productivity and standardized test scores (Heissel & Norris, 2017).

Recess should not be scheduled immediately before or immediately after physical education or exploratory classes such as art, computer, music or other specials. Although recess and physical education provide opportunities for physical activity, back-to-back time slots can also negatively affect student activity levels. For example, if students play at recess for 20 minutes and then transition immediately to a physical education class, they may be fatigued and put forth less effort for skill development and practice. Additional off-task behaviors are more likely in this scenario. If these back-to-back opportunities are flipped (students have physical education immediately before recess), they may be more reluctant to play at recess and choose to rest instead of being physically active. Also, when recess is scheduled before or after other specials, students are receiving two breaks from academic learning, which is certainly beneficial, but it would be more advantageous if one break was provided in the morning (recess) and the other break was provided in the afternoon (e.g., music).

As an example, Finnish schools provide 10 to 15 minutes of recess for every 45 minutes of learning. Coincidentally, students from Finland also earn top scores in math, science and reading literacy (Doyle, 2016). The correlation between Finland's academic achievement and reoccurring recess should encourage more schools to adopt such a model.

One additional point of emphasis for scheduling recess is that it should not be scheduled at the end of the school day. When this occurs, many teachers seemingly view recess as a reward, like dangling candy in front of children. If or when students do not complete their academic work or occasionally misbehave, recess is taken away at the end of the day. Recess should be viewed as a break from academic learning time, not as a reward at the end of the school day. Recess (and the benefits of participation) would be more advantageous if used earlier in the school day between academic content. Scheduling recess in this way serves two purposes. First, it separates breaks within the school day into sections. Second, strategic scheduling provides children with a physical activity break

and further enhances their brain function and academic potential upon returning to the classroom environment (Active Living Research, 2013).

## Recess Equipment

Physical activity equipment should be readily available for students. An effective strategy is to color-code equipment (first grade is blue, second grade is yellow, etc.) for each class or grade level and assign an equipment manager to help organize and collect equipment. When students have equipment at recess (balls, jump ropes, etc.), they are more likely to increase their physical activity levels (Escalante, Garcia-Hermoso, Backx, & Saavedra, 2014; Ickes, Erwin, & Beighle, 2013). Children should also have the liberty to choose what they want to do at recess. By providing equipment, teachers can encourage their students to be more physically active compared with only playing on monkey bars, participating in short-lived tag games, or playing nothing at all. In a society in which our current generation of children begs to be entertained by external factors (television, tablets or games), physical activity equipment during recess can assist in increasing levels of play and amusement.

## Recess Supervision and Alternatives for Discipline

Teachers or other trained school personnel should properly supervise recess. Many teachers assume they are actively supervising students while sitting on a bench. However, their presence alone is not sufficient, because children know where to go to be out of a teacher's sight. In addition, recess is occasionally a place for student bullying, especially when teachers are not actively supervising students. Instead of being alerted to potentially emotionally disturbing situations (e.g., bullying), teachers often mainly focus their attention on possible safety issues, such as students walking in front of a moving swing or students diving head first down the slide. Effective supervision means teachers should roam the playground and view students from every angle, including behind and under play structures. Continual movement also provides an opportunity for a "walk and talk" with another teacher, which could include time for social interaction with another adult or to discuss school-related matters. Teachers might also make opportunities to walk and talk with students. This method provides the chance for students to be more open about things they may be less willing to discuss in front of their peers.

Teachers should only intervene when a child's physical or emotional safety is at risk (Kovar, Combs, Campbell, Napper-Owen, & Worrell, 2011). Students should be taught basic conflict resolution skills such as "walk, talk or rock" (walk away, talk it out, or rock/paper/scissors) instead of always resorting to a teacher for mediation. Conflict resolution skills should be emphasized in health education, and they can be adapted to any classroom environment (peace table, conflict corner, etc.) and especially at recess, which encourages students to learn and



practice social skills like peer negotiation, active listening and problem solving. As an example of these strategies, one physical education teacher in South Carolina provided a great video and poster for creating a conflict corner for use in a gym, classroom or playground space (Landers, 2015).

Some conflicts may be prevented if teachers teach safety rules for recess. Many teachers assume students know how to act appropriately on the playground, but they often find themselves correcting students for their inappropriate behavior. Instead, classroom teachers should walk students through playground/recess rules at the beginning of the school year and revisit these rules as needed. Teachers should take their classes outside and demonstrate appropriate behaviors so students have concrete examples instead of just a quick “in-class” discussion. Teachers can state how traveling down the slide head first, for example, could cause injury. Students can then understand the correlation between cause and effect. In a society in which many children have not had opportunities for unsupervised play (often a result of neighborhood safety concerns, weather, or lack of a social network and/or isolation from peers), some students need to be specifically taught how to play appropriately and safely.

In some schools, students forfeit recess time for off-task behavior or for failing to complete their class work. This rule often results in time “on the fence” to watch as their peers play at recess. This tactic may infuse guilt or regret, but teachers often find the same students in this predicament over and over again because children do not change their behaviors. Thus, it does not appear that time on the fence serves the desired purpose. Students are losing desperately needed physical activity and social time necessary for their childhood development. In many situations, the students who are “disciplined” the most are the ones who need recess the most.

Appropriate discipline should be discussed but should not affect recess opportunities. However, if a teacher desires to keep recess as part of their discipline process, there are a few alternatives to entirely prohibiting recess. For example, teachers may choose to restrict the play area for one day. If a student truly enjoys the swings or monkey bars, the teacher may remove that opportunity from that particular student, a direct result of his or her inappropriate actions. As an alternative, this student may only have access to the green space or black top for activity. Teachers may also have the students perform a “think walk” prior to free play at recess. This time can be used for the student(s) to reflect on what was done and why it was inappropriate. Ultimately, these students are getting physical activity during the think walk and are given a specific opportunity to reflect on their actions, rather than just standing by the fence perhaps envying their peers who are playing. Calling this a “think walk” instead of “running laps” is advisable, because most students associate laps with punishment. Encouraging physical activity in a positive manner is the ultimate goal. Teachers may also discipline students by implementing silent lunch or telling them to make up work during “free choice” time in class. Removing recess is not a good strategy and is discouraged in school wellness policies at the state and national levels.

## Return from Recess

After recess, class management can be challenging for teachers. Some teachers choose to implement a “traffic light” approach to encourage appropriate behavior and effective classroom management. For example, a “green light” is reflective of a “go and be active” mentality at recess. A “yellow light” is introduced to allow students to engage in subtle movements while bringing their minds and bodies back to a less physical learning environment. Teachers may use slower movement techniques, such as having Maximo from GoNoodle (<http://www.gonoodle.com>) guide students through a brief yoga session or having students review sight words using their bodies to form the letters (see “Body Spell”). Students could also lead the class in stretching exercises with some calming music to settle down, or they can read aloud and ask students to move their bodies while they listen to a story. For example, students could perform squats or arm raises whenever they hear the word “go” in *Marvin K. Mooney Will You Please Go Now!* by Dr. Seuss (2016). Such activities encourage listening but also allow students to slow down and return to a less physical and more homeostatic state of mind.

Incorporating language arts components after recess may also be beneficial. Teachers can ask students to discuss or journal what they did at recess, with whom, with what equipment, using what rules, and if they enjoyed the activity or not. This journaling opportunity could also be a drawing time for younger students. Using this time as a “show and tell” or for practicing public speaking skills by becoming the “expert” in a game or activity can be especially meaningful.

## Summary

Students need recess, and teachers need to promote recess for students. Schools need administrative support, including appropriate time, facilities and equipment. Therefore, scheduling, implementing and managing recess appropriately is necessary so that all students receive the maximal benefits during their early learning years. Recess is needed every day all year for all students, so that they can 1) develop, maintain and appreciate a physically active lifestyle; 2) practice critical social and emotional skills; 3) be more prepared and energetic for classroom-based learning; and 4) gain countless other benefits. Recess should not be a privilege for some; it is necessary for all.

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