

INTRODUCTION

The Case for Recess

On a sunny April weekday in California, fourth- and fifth-grade students at Northside Elementary School eagerly walked with their teachers from their classrooms to the school's outdoor yard.¹ Northside is a school that serves mainly Latinx students, more than half of whom entered school as English learners, and the majority of whom receive free and reduced-priced meals. Students could barely keep still with excitement for their impending recess time. They gathered outside for a brief moment to learn about the games that were set up by Coach Diana, a paraprofessional who was hired by the school specifically to support recess. She directed students' attention to the day's options: soccer on the field to the left, three-line basketball or knockout on the courts, and four-square on the four-square courts. Jump ropes were laid out by the basketball court, and Coach Diana advised students not to jump too close to the basketball game. She also invited students to play dodgeball with her and made a few other suggestions, including walking and talking and practicing gymnastics on the grass, which she had noticed was a new activity that the fifth-grade girls

enjoyed. She left them with a final reminder that there is no running on the blacktop and that everyone should be following school rules in all the games. With that, Coach Diana blew her whistle, and the students chose where they wanted to start their recess period.

Coach Diana selected the games and activities carefully that day, building on her work throughout the school year to organize the outdoor space into predictable places where certain kinds of activities take place. She intentionally designed recess to help students establish common rules to games that everyone could agree on and to reflect what students in fourth and fifth grade most like to play. She created options for them where they could feel safe—physically, emotionally—to have fun, take risks, and be part of an inclusive school environment. If only every school had a Coach Diana.

If only every school had recess.

Rethinking Recess: Creating Safe and Inclusive Playtime for All Children in School draws on a decade of field research, policy analysis, and exploration of the literature, to make the case for rethinking how schools provide recess. In addition, this book was written to offer specific guidance for school leaders, policy makers, community organizers, and others interested in actionable approaches for supporting equitable, high-quality school environments.

In this book, I focus not only on day-to-day recess practices, staffing, and funding considerations but also on larger state and federal policy contexts that affect recess time.

Recess is an essential part of the elementary school experience. Too often, though, recess is an afterthought—a blank space in the middle of the packed school day. I believe, and research supports, that there should be an intentionality around recess design where recess plans are developed like classroom plans, with attention to safety, health, social and emotional learning, and engagement.

Simply offering recess is insufficient to elicit students' engagement in safe and healthy play. The book introduces a purposeful approach to organizing recess and presents key tools to enhance its effectiveness as a learning space, including conflict resolution, inclusivity, and student leadership. The book also tackles policy considerations, including the use of recess

withholding as punishment and how state and federal policy can better promote high-quality recess. With planning and support, recess can meet students' social, emotional, and physical developmental needs and create an environment in which students feel safe and can have fun.

The Right to Play

The word *recess* means a brief interlude for relaxation between periods of work, or in other words, a break. These breaks are not unique to students and schools. Adults take breaks during their days too—lunch breaks and courtroom recesses, to name two. Breaks are not a luxury. Research shows that taking breaks increases the productivity of adult workers because the time away from work reenergizes them to focus better when they return.² Evidence also points to the detrimental effects of sitting in one place for long periods of time; medical professionals now recommend that adults who are seated for their jobs take a break and move around every thirty minutes.³ Growing in popularity, the latest time management strategies even suggest using a timer to separate bursts of work time with short breaks.⁴ Historically, the vast majority of US elementary schools also had built into their daily schedules one or two short breaks for recess. Beginning in the late 1980s, the assumption that recess is a necessity changed.

Elementary schools at that time began to reduce or even eliminate breaks for children during the school day. There's a cultural and historical context for this unfortunate and, in my opinion, damaging and costly shift. In the late 1980s, international student performance comparisons demonstrated the underperformance of US students relative to their peers in other countries, spurring a desire for domestic reforms aimed at closing that gap. This reform effort culminated with the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, which put into place a standards-based accountability framework that required schools, school districts, and states to meet certain benchmarks or risk sanctions, including loss of funding and, worse, the reconstitution of the school under new management. Student performance was measured by standardized tests in two subjects: math and English language arts. This focus on standardized testing led to enormous pressure for administrators and teachers, particularly in schools that were underperforming on these

tests, to improve math and English test scores. This pressure, in turn, led to prioritization of instruction in these two subjects over so-called non-essential subjects. Recess was among the periods during the day that was reduced or eliminated in favor of more instructional time in core subjects. Along with art and music, recess became expendable.

Counter to the notion that students, like adults, need a break to improve their productivity and well-being, many school districts—notably Atlanta, Baltimore, and Chicago—took the drastic step of eliminating recess altogether, even for very young children in elementary schools. Estimates suggest that in the five years after No Child Left Behind was first implemented, 20 percent of elementary school districts had shrunk their recess time, averaging a reduction of fifty minutes per week.⁵

Still, recess had its supporters. During this time, major human rights, policy, and advocacy groups began to offer position statements on the importance of play for children and recess in schools. In 1989, nearly every nation worldwide signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states, “That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child . . .”⁶ Educational organizations—including the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Association for Childhood Education International, National Association of Elementary School Principals, and National Association of State Boards of Education—followed with position statements and reports that demonstrated their strong support for recess time in elementary schools.

At the same time, a public health crisis was gripping the nation. Between 1988 and 2007, the obesity rate for elementary-aged children increased by 75 percent, with one-fifth of children in this age group categorized as obese in 2007.⁷ Since that time, obesity rates have leveled off and even declined slightly, but this dramatic rise prompted responses from public health agencies to implore schools to use recess as a way to increase children’s physical activity during the day. Public health advocates have indeed been successful; the focus of recess policy since that time has been on increasing minutes of physical activity available to children. States have even begun to mandate minutes of daily recess, all in an effort to increase children’s

opportunities for exercise. This effort is an important start, but it is not enough. This single-minded focus on physical health overlooks the challenges schools face with their recess time—including disciplinary referrals, exclusion, and bullying—and does not recognize the other important benefits recess can support.

On this front, the tide is again turning. Two powerful public health organizations have weighed in on the importance of recess, and significantly, both have included in their statements an acknowledgment that supporting an emotionally and physically safe recess requires school planning and staff training. In 2013, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement that identifies both the value of recess for elementary students as well as key features of what it considers to be a well-run recess.⁸ This was the first time that the organization acknowledged that attention to what happens at recess is an important part of making sure recess is meeting students' developmental needs. In 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention along with SHAPE America released two reports that detail strategies for improving elementary school recess.⁹ The guidance they offer embraces recess as a place where social and emotional learning is solidified, in addition to an opportunity for exercise in the school day.

The Importance of Recess

How recess is supported and what happens during that time is critical if students are to reap its benefits. Many adults have an idyllic view of recess from their own childhoods, thinking of it as a carefree break from an unrelenting school day filled with rules and behavioral expectations. Even today, many elementary students will tell you that recess is indeed their favorite subject. For others, recess can be a stressful and even scary time. Despite research that points to the multiple benefits of recess, it can be unsatisfying or even detrimental to students if children are unprepared to initiate and sustain their own games, if adults act punitively rather than supportively, if conflicts and bullying occur unchecked, and if the recess culture promotes winning over engagement as the ultimate goal of play. Rather than address these challenges, many schools have neglected or overlooked recess as an important part of students' school day.

It is well documented that young children learn and develop in valuable ways through play. Those who advocate for school recess time have organized themselves into camps espousing two different types of play: free play with minimal adult interference and structured play, which is more like a physical education class. I contend that this is a false dichotomy. Those who champion free play reason that without adult interference, children use their imaginations to drive their play and that they learn important lessons about how to navigate complex social issues. While this outcome might be true for some students in some schools, in many schools, unregulated recess time without purposeful adult guidance ends with students lined up outside the principal's office to be admonished for their poor behavior. In schools that do not pay attention to recess, it can be a chaotic and disorganized time, which can be stressful for both children and adult supervisors. These kinds of recess periods are likely not able to promote the developmental growth that recess has the potential to help students accrue. On the other end of the spectrum is a structured recess, which offers adult-led games and activities without free choice and is more like a physical education class. This kind of rigid approach to recess might result in more minutes of exercise or pedometer steps, but it restricts opportunities for children to grow socially and emotionally through negotiations that happen in more unstructured play.

In this book, I introduce the concept of an "organized recess," which is a hybrid between free play and structured recess times. Organized recess is achieved through thoughtful programming and staff training and promotes a recess time that is safe, healthy, and fun; it offers opportunities for enhancing students' social and emotional development. It provides more order than a free play recess by making clear the game offerings and game rules, but also embeds free choice and opportunities for imaginative play. In organized recess, multiple games with common rules are present, students know conflict resolution strategies, students have free choice and games are inclusive to all who want to play, and adults support students through prosocial modeling. Research demonstrates the efficacy of this approach on a variety of outcomes, including improving school climate and decreasing bullying.¹⁰ Important life lessons are hard to learn when recess is not operating at its full potential, but with

intentional scaffolding, all children can benefit from this valuable time and learn through play.

What are these benefits of recess? The health benefits are unmistakable: recess affords students opportunities for physical activity, which is important to meet the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation of sixty minutes per day of activity.¹¹ More than just a way to address obesity, exercise is important because it helps children to concentrate, improves their self-esteem, and has even been associated with reduced depression.¹² Physical activity has been associated with improved cognition in children and adults.¹³ There is also evidence of a strong link between physical activity during the school day and students' academic performance.¹⁴

Other benefits of recess are equally as important, including improvements in student classroom behavior.¹⁵ Having a well-designed recess in place reduces the amount of time classroom teachers spend helping their students resolve post-recess problems; one estimate shows teachers can gain as much as the equivalent of a full day's instruction simply from improving recess.¹⁶ In addition, during a well-designed recess, elementary students engage in a variety of play activities that can help them learn and practice skills such as conflict resolution, decision-making, compromise, and self-regulation. When students have productive recess time, they can use it to build relationships with peers and adults, especially those whom they may not see in their classrooms. Relationship building is especially important because recess experiences affect both students' and teachers' perceptions of school climate.¹⁷ Finally, recess is a key time in the school day that can support students' development socially and emotionally.¹⁸ For elementary school students, social and emotional skill development helps them to manage their emotions, show respect and empathy for others, and create positive relationships with peers, among other outcomes.¹⁹ Rather than detract from students' learning, research has shown that promoting social and emotional learning at school is strongly associated with improvements in academic achievement across grade levels.²⁰

Educational reforms today include deliberate efforts to promote positive school climate. A positive school climate reflects a school's attention to fostering students' and adults' feelings of physical and emotional safety, strong student-adult and student-student relationships, and student and

adult connectedness or engagement to school, as well as creating a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment.²¹ As with social and emotional learning, efforts to enhance school climate are associated with improved academic and mental health outcomes for students.²²

Reforms to enhance school climate and social and emotional learning often overlook recess as a prime opportunity for reinforcing their goals. Yet, the evidence offers strong justification that recess is a vital context for these reforms to take root. I firmly believe that a well-designed and purposeful recess can help children to accrue developmental gains and have fun, while still benefiting the school goal of academic learning. When recess is designed to be safe and healthy, it serves the students' developmental needs, improves the school climate, reduces disciplinary issues, and reclaims precious minutes of instruction time in the classroom.

The State of Recess Today?

Here is the good news: As a result of multipronged advocacy efforts and the realization on the part of administrators that eliminating recess may not be what is best for students after all, we are currently seeing a resurgence of recess. Responding to concerns about students' needs for both more physical activity and mental break time, eight states, from Colorado to Connecticut, have enacted policy changes that would ensure children's right to recess every day.²³ Although a comprehensive source of information on how many schools offer students recess and for how long is not yet available, evidence suggests recess is on the rise. Atlanta, Baltimore, and Chicago—those large school districts that abolished recess—have now reinstated it. Between 2000 and 2014, the share of elementary schools that reported providing regularly scheduled recess for their students increased from 71 percent to 94 percent.²⁴ Yet, the most recent estimates indicate that only 20 percent of school districts nationwide have policies *mandating* daily elementary school recess, and 60 percent have no official recess policy at all.²⁵

Although data suggest that recess is on the rise, when considered from an equity lens, the issue of recess provision takes on a new level of urgency. Students who are from underrepresented minority or lower socioeconomic

status backgrounds are more likely to be enrolled in schools that do not offer regular recess.²⁶ Removing recess denies these children key learning opportunities and midday breaks that we know help to solidify classroom learning.

Even where daily recess is included in the bell schedule, substantial groups of students may miss out because recess time is withheld for misbehavior, unfinished school work, or other issues. There is little research on the frequency and effect of withholding recess, but available evidence suggests that policies allowing recess to be withheld for behavioral issues or to complete school work are significantly more prevalent at schools with higher concentrations of low-income students.²⁷ For teachers, withholding recess, which is many students' favorite time of the school day, is perhaps the most salient threat they can make to keep students behaving in class. Yet, the notion of withholding recess from students who have trouble behaving or concentrating in class is counterintuitive because it is precisely these children who need a break to get their wiggles out or refocus their brains. The repeated removal of certain students from recess for punishment sends signals to these students that they do not belong and are incapable of being socialized with their peers, and is among the very first steps in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Today, when recess is having its resurgence, we have a new opportunity to ensure equitable access to play, physical activity, and social and emotional development for *all* elementary schoolchildren. Offering recess every day to every child is an important first step, but simply offering recess is not a guarantee that it will be a productive time for students. This book recognizes the renewed interest in using recess time productively and provides a springboard for using research-based strategies to design high-quality recess plans for all schools to engage students, improve school climate, promote healthy lifestyles, and support academic learning as well as social and emotional development.

About the Research

In 2009, I was first introduced to leaders at Playworks, the only national nonprofit organization of which I am aware that is actively engaged with

educators to reframe recess as a critical time for positive development among students and support their safe and healthy play throughout the school day. This initial conversation led to a decade of collaboration to understand what recess reform looks like, the necessary inputs for lasting change, and the ways that recess reform can benefit children and adults in school. This research, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, serves as the basis for this book. The examples and lessons learned are drawn from three major studies that my colleagues and I conducted in partnership with Playworks. In total, this research includes thirty schools implementing programs associated with Playworks and twelve schools that were randomly assigned (as part of one of the studies) to a control group that was interested in reforming recess but delayed formal implementation for one year during the study.

In the first project, we set out to understand the experiences of six newly implementing schools and two established schools as they went about reforming their recess times in Northern California. Using extensive field notes and rich description, we were able to characterize the transition of the play yard throughout the school year. The second study was a national randomized controlled trial that assessed the impact of the program on a variety of student outcomes in five regions. My colleagues at Mathematica Policy Research were responsible for the quantitative or impact portion of this study, and my team of researchers were on the ground assessing recess operations and student engagement at recess in both the treatment and control schools. In an effort to expand access to safe and healthy recess across the country, Playworks began to shift its work toward empowering schools to improve their own recesses through providing ongoing training to their own recess staff. The third study included six regions nationally and focused on how school leaders make changes to recess that align with their existing school policies and programs.

In each of these studies, data collection included interviews with principals, teachers, recess coaches and aides, and in some cases Playworks national and regional staff; observations of multiple recess periods at each school spanning all elementary grades; and focus groups with fourth- and fifth-grade recess leaders. Research teams participating in these studies included doctoral students and master's-level staff researchers, both men

and women, representing a diversity of ethnic backgrounds. I also rely on annual surveys of staff and administrators at hundreds of schools nationally and a survey of elementary principals collected by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Gallup in 2010.

These rich data, spanning from 2005–06 to 2015–16, cover diverse geographic locations and student populations, representing a variety of school contexts, recess and school policies, recess yard setups (including one on an urban rooftop!), and other factors that affect student and staff recess experiences. Schools served predominantly low-income populations and were located mainly in urban school districts nationally. The anecdotes shared in this book come directly from this research. Names of individuals, schools, and regions have been changed to protect the identities of the research respondents, who were assured confidentiality when they agreed to participate in the studies.

The lessons from Playworks and other research in this book point the way for the future. Improving recess requires that educators, administrators, and policy makers understand the difficult situations present every day on the play yard and then implement a diverse array of solutions so that all children can have the recess they need to grow and learn. *Rethinking Recess* is intended to help them. As such, the book is organized into three parts that help readers to understand and overcome the challenges of recess time. The first part focuses on recess today and why a renewed focus on recess time is essential. Chapter 1 explores how the accountability movement and other current recess policies have created deep inequities in who has access to the benefits of recess to make the case for focusing on improving recess policy and practice. In chapter 2 I build on this case by going inside schools and drawing on a large survey of principals to illustrate why recess in the United States—of wildly variable quality and a common source of unnecessary discipline referrals—is in need of reform. The second part offers specifics on how to improve recess environments at the school site, including a focus on engagement, as well as social and emotional learning. In chapter 3, I expand on the tenets of an organized recess and break down the steps recess advocates can take to plan a better recess. Chapter 4 goes into more detail on how to create a culture of play at recess by embedding inclusivity, student leadership, and conflict

resolution. Chapter 5 reports on the social and emotional progress for students that ensues when schools attend to recess in the ways described. Part 3 of the book explores the role of educational leadership and policy makers in supporting purposeful recess for all children. Chapter 6 considers local policies and practices that can support improved recess environments, and chapter 7 focuses on state and federal policy. Chapter 8 concludes with an analysis and synthesis of the findings and offers guidance for the future of policy and educational leadership moving toward a more effective recess for all children.

Today, we understand that recess is not a disposable period in the school day, but instead it's a time that contributes strongly to students' academic learning, social and emotional growth, and physical development. Unfortunately, this period with limitless potential has been eliminated in many schools. And worse, recess has been jettisoned inequitably, serving to further marginalize students who face the most barriers to academic success.

In this book, I propose we bring recess back to every elementary school and use this opportunity to rethink recess not only for the students who have been without recess but for all elementary school students. With intent, planning, and commitment on the part of educators and policy makers, recess can live up to its potential of providing students with a break from their structured classroom that supports their whole child development. More than ever before, today's generation of learners must be academically prepared and also savvy in skills such as collaboration, negotiation, self-control, and empathy. Where can they learn and practice these essential twenty-first century skills? At recess!