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## R.I. education: Recess, please!

Pair of groups want to bring playtime back to elementary schools

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Two grassroots groups are urging the state Department of Education to restore recess to what they say is its rightful place in the school day.

Parents Across Rhode Island has a petition, signed by more than 800 people, that asks the education department to include 30 minutes of daily recess for elementary students as part of the school day. The department now requires 100 minutes a week for health and physical education but it doesn't set aside time for recess, although some districts incorporate it into their gym classes.

"Kids need to play," said Tracy Ramos, president of Parents Across Rhode Island. "Recess needs to be elevated to the same level of importance as any other standards we expect from our kids."

Another group, Recess for Rhode Island, surveyed 90 public and private schools in Rhode Island and found that only 18 percent offered between 20 and 30 minutes of daily recess; 70 percent withheld recess as a disciplinary practice; and 57 percent said their playgrounds lack adequate space and equipment.

Janice O'Donnell, the former executive director of the Providence Children's Museum, remembers holding a series of community forums about play and, "No matter what the topic, recess always came up." O'Donnell and others created a website and began a conversation about recess about a year ago.

Nationally, only 20 percent of school districts require daily recess and just 19 percent recommend it for elementary school children, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Parents say recess has fallen prey to the growing emphasis on testing, higher academic standards and teacher accountability. This is happening despite a voluminous body of research that shows free play is critical to the social, emotional and physical well-being of children.

"Active play is so central to child development that it should be included in the very definition of childhood," according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. "Play helps children develop creativity and imagination ... contributes to healthy brain development ... [and] is essential to developing social and emotional ties."

The academy also found that reduced playtime disproportionately affects children living in poverty. Providence, for example, only offers 10 minutes of daily recess.

Urban districts also face physical challenges. Many elementary schools have paved lots with little or no equipment. They have no indoor space when children are forced inside by bad weather. A Providence charter school principal once said that she had to cancel recess occasionally because of gunshots or reports of violence.

"When we did the survey, the majority of principals said, yes, recess is critical, and yet we're still seeing these issues," said Karin Wetherill, wellness coordinator of the Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition, part of Recess for Rhode Island. "By the time some kids get on the playground, they get seven minutes. We need to support these principals."

Weatherill wants the state to set aside 20 minutes a day for recess. She also wants to include recess within the state's health-and-wellness reporting requirements so schools are held accountable for making time for recess.

Both groups want the state Department of Education to include recess as part of the minimum instructional hours required by the state, which stands at 5.5 hours.

Rhode Island Education Commissioner Ken Wagner agrees that recess is an important component of the school experience, noting that the state's basic education plan requires that schools "provide daily recess opportunities" for elementary students. But he says he is reluctant to impose any additional state mandates on schools.

"Community members dissatisfied with matters such as the scheduling of recess time should discuss their concerns with school leaders or bring their concerns to their school committees," he said. "If these issues cannot be resolved locally, community members can seek a hearing that will lead to a commissioner's decision."

But recess proponents say schools are unlikely to lengthen the school day or trim academic classes to make room for recess.

Meanwhile, several schools are trying to incorporate movement into the regular school day.

When a group of parents lobbied for more recess in Charho, the regional school district responded by extending recess at the middle school, doubling physical education in high school and hiring a private nonprofit to train its teaching assistants. In addition, withholding recess can no longer be used as punishment unless the student misbehaved during recess.

The Captain Isaac Paine Elementary School in Foster hired a private, nonprofit called Playworks to train teachers and their assistants how to structure recess in



First grader Nathaniel LaRose, right, takes a yoga break with Michael Descoteaux, center, Dreyden Scott and teacher, Ashley Custodio, at Captain Isaac Paine Elementary School in Foster. The Providence Journal/Mary Murphy

ways that keep children safe. The school also encourages teachers to break up the day by including brief bursts of movement. Some teachers offer yoga, others take walking breaks while some play short dance videos.

"Building movement into our day is a huge focus for us," said Paine Principal Kristen Danusis.

The Learning Community, a charter school in Central Falls, turned its hardtop into a colorful and imaginative playground. Recess isn't an after-thought; it's an essential part of the school day. Students also take regular breaks to do brief exercises called brain gym that help them refocus.

"Our kids work really hard in class," said Sarah Bernstein, the school's director of operations. "We feel they need to get out some of their energy. They also need the opportunity to develop social skills, to figure out how to problem-solve and how to initiate friendships."

"I definitely think all of us need a break," said Cheryl Rosa, a school nurse at Aquidneck Island Elementary School in Middletown. "We need to stretch, take some deep breaths. This is part of what we all need to cope."

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*Correction: A previous version of this story incorrectly spelled Karin Weatherill's name.*

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