

[Learn about KUOW and the future of 88.5 \(http://kuow.org/pacific-lutheran-university-announces-intent-sell-kplu-885-fm-uw-s-kuow-public-radio\)](http://kuow.org/pacific-lutheran-university-announces-intent-sell-kplu-885-fm-uw-s-kuow-public-radio)

# Withholding recess is banned in 10 states. But it's common in Seattle

By [ANN DORNFELD \(/PEOPLE/ANN-DORNFELD\)](#) • APR 21, 2016

[Twitter \(http://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.tinyurl.com%2Fzf6tgsd&text=Withholding%20recess%20is%20banned%20in%2](http://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.tinyurl.com%2Fzf6tgsd&text=Withholding%20recess%20is%20banned%20in%2)



([http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kuow/files/styles/x\\_large/public/201604/recess.jpg](http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kuow/files/styles/x_large/public/201604/recess.jpg))

*Seattle schools must offer 30 minutes a day of recess, but teachers can withhold recess as a disciplinary tool.*



Listen

5:57



This school year, Seattle Public Schools agreed to teachers' union demands for a minimum amount of recess: 30 minutes a day.

The move came after KUOW investigations showed a dramatic disparity in how much recess kids get at different Seattle elementary schools, with those at low income schools and students of color receiving far less recess, on average, than kids at wealthier schools.

Despite the new 30-minute recess requirements, whether kids get that much time – or any recess at all – is often up to their teachers.

Fourth-grader Desmond Collins' favorite game at recess is called "Epic Fails," a game of competitive slapstick. "If there's monkey bars you purposely slip off and fail on as much as you can," he says.

But Desmond, who attends an elementary in Seattle's south end, says sometimes he doesn't get to go to recess.

"Lots of times, actually," he said.

"For example, once I got up to get a drink of water, but [my teacher] gave me detention, and detention is staying in for all of recess. So I didn't get any recess at all," Desmond said.

Withholding recess is common practice in Seattle Public Schools. Sometimes kids are kept in for punishment. Other times to finish an assignment.

Carly Nelson, a third-grade teacher at Lowell Elementary, says when teachers don't have many discipline options, letting kids know that recess is at stake can encourage good behavior.

"Some kids are scared that they're going to get in trouble, and then they make good choices," she says. "'I want to follow the rules, because I don't want to lose any of my recess time.'"

But what's been a popular discipline tactic for decades is now falling out of favor.

"I can see how it's absolutely tempting for teachers to hold recess as a form of punishment, because it is such a valued currency for the children. But I think for so many reasons, that's absolutely the wrong thing to do," said Dr. Pooja Tandon, a pediatrician and researcher at Seattle Children's and the University of Washington.

She points to the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/1/183>) that recess never be withheld for discipline or academic reasons.

"There's lots of evidence that the opportunity to run around and to get that break that children get when they get recess is associated with better behavior, better learning, better attention," Tandon says.

Withholding recess is banned in ten states. The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction also recommends (<http://www.k12.wa.us/ChildNutrition/SchoolWellness/SchoolWellnessManual.pdf>) against keeping kids in. But it's still allowed in Seattle Public Schools.



Erin Romanuk, program manager for attendance and discipline for Seattle Public Schools, knows this latest thinking.

"We know that research shows that withholding recess for students isn't necessarily effective in certain cases," Romanuk says. "We also know that students who need recess the most are the ones who kind of find themselves in the situation where they're not earning their recess."

Still, Romanuk says there can be good reasons to keep kids in.

"Sometimes schools use that time to be able to kind of teach social skills, to build up what does success look like for that student, to kind of coach and model behaviors so they can be more successful and actually enjoy being out at recess," she says.

It's unknown how often students are kept in from recess in Seattle or across Washington. Even though districts are required to collect discipline data and report it to the state, losing recess is typically between a teacher and a student.

Some Seattle teachers interviewed say it's a more common form of punishment at low-income schools, and that they see kids of color are disproportionately kept in.

If that's true, that means that the district's new 30-minute recess policy requiring doesn't actually level the playing field between rich and poor, black and white as much as intended.

Back at Lowell Elementary, Principal Geri Guerrero is monitoring kindergarten recess.

She says kids get a lot out of recess – from working on social skills to experiential learning. "I see recess as an instructional time," she said.

Illustrating her point, a kindergartner excitedly runs toward her waving a glittering clod of dirt. Guerrero leans in to inspect the sparkles.

"What do you think it is?" she asks. The boy isn't sure, but his working theory is that it is a diamond. He runs off to show his teacher for another opinion.

Guerrero says Lowell staff see recess as so valuable to kids that they recently voted to stop using it as a bargaining chip.

"Historically, recess has always been used as a leverage to get students to get their work done. What we found is that that doesn't actually work – it actually backfires on the student and the teacher," she said. Students who hasn't gotten their wiggles out will probably only wiggle more later in the day.

Lowell teacher Carly Nelson says it's been years since she took recess away from a student.

"To be honest, it was like a punishment for me," she laughed.

"I would have to tell the student go stand on the wall, and you can't play, and then I would kind of have to keep an eye on the student, and make sure that they weren't. Then, if they did go play, I'd have to deal with it," Nelson said. "In the end, it felt like 'I don't even know if they learned to change their behavior!' because whatever reason they were out there in the first place, they might go out there and do it again."

But if you're going to take away one discipline strategy, Nelson said, you need to come up with a new one.

"The emphasis on that is very important. Instead of just saying, 'You can't use recess as a consequence' – then I feel like you need to have a plan. 'Well, what are we going to do to help the students make good choices?'"

At Lowell, Nelson says they're using a lot of new strategies. Teachers and students take 30 minutes a day to talk about good behavior, and put the emphasis on that – not on punishment. Most of the students are children of color, so the school recently hired an African-American male student support worker who visits kids with recurrent behavior and academic issues in class to see how they're doing.

At the district level, Seattle Public Schools just started looking at its discipline policies "with an equity lens," Romanuk said.

But she said there are no plans to look at the practice of withholding recess.

**TAGS:** [KIDS AND PARENTING \(/TERM/KIDS-AND-PARENTING\)](/TERM/KIDS-AND-PARENTING)

[SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION \(/TERM/SCHOOLS-AND-EDUCATION\)](/TERM/SCHOOLS-AND-EDUCATION) [FEATURE \(/TERM/FEATURE\)](/TERM/FEATURE)

## Related Content

---

[\(/post/if-we-copied-massachusetts-would-we-get-education\)](/post/if-we-copied-massachusetts-would-we-get-education)

[\(/post/if-we-copied-massachusetts-would-we-get-education\)](/post/if-we-copied-massachusetts-would-we-get-education)

[\(/post/if-we-copied-massachusetts-would-we-get-education\)](/post/if-we-copied-massachusetts-would-we-get-education)

2 weeks ago



(/post

/if-we-copied-massachusetts-would-we-get-education)

If We Copied Massachusetts, Would We Get An A+ For Education? (/post/if-we-copied-massachusetts-would-we-get-education)

(/post/there-really-giant-octopus-under-tacoma-narrows-bridge)

(/post/there-really-giant-octopus-under-tacoma-narrows-bridge)

(/post/there-really-giant-octopus-under-tacoma-narrows-bridge)

2 weeks ago



(/post

/there-really-giant-octopus-under-tacoma-narrows-bridge)

Is there really a giant octopus under the Tacoma Narrows Bridge? (/post/there-really-giant-octopus-under-tacoma-narrows-bridge)

(/post/manintree-mom-heartbroken-years-trying-help-son)

(/post/manintree-mom-heartbroken-years-trying-help-son)

(/post/manintree-mom-heartbroken-years-trying-help-son)

1 month ago





(/post

/manintree-mom-heartbroken-years-trying-help-son)

#Manintree Mom Heartbroken By Years Of Trying To Help Son (/post/manintree-mom-heartbroken-years-trying-help-son)

---

(/post/who-s-your-school-dad-highline-wants-kids-feel-bonded)

(/post/who-s-your-school-dad-highline-wants-kids-feel-bonded)

(/post/who-s-your-school-dad-highline-wants-kids-feel-bonded)

2 weeks ago





(/post

/who-s-your-school-dad-highline-wants-kids-feel-bonded)

Who's Your School Dad? Highline Wants Kids To Feel Bonded (/post/who-s-your-school-dad-highline-wants-kids-feel-bonded)



(<https://www.facebook.com/kuowpublicradio/>)

(<https://twitter.com/KUOW>)

(<https://www.instagram.com/kuow/?hl=en>)

(<https://www.youtube.com/user/KUOW949>)



(<http://kuowcereal.tumblr.com/>)

[Terms of Use \(http://kuow.org/terms-use\)](http://kuow.org/terms-use)

[Privacy Statement \(http://kuow.org/privacy\)](http://kuow.org/privacy)

[FCC EEO \(http://www2.kuow.org/reports/eeo-statement20150930.pdf\)](http://www2.kuow.org/reports/eeo-statement20150930.pdf)

© 2016 KUOW News and Information