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Withholding Recess as a Punishment Declines



Students swing during recess at Patterson International Elementary School in Lakewood, Colo., earlier this month. More schools are banning or limiting the use of withholding recess for punitive reasons as research shows the benefits of playtime for students.

—Nathan W. Arnes for Education Week

As schools move to ban restrictions on playtime, some teachers resist losing discretion over discipline

By **Evie Blad**

It's not uncommon for elementary school teachers to take away recess time to discipline students. Withholding cherished playtime clearly communicates to children that their misbehavior is unacceptable, they argue.

But more and more, schools are doing away with withholding recess for disciplinary reasons, pointing to research findings that unstructured play and exercise benefit students both inside and outside the classroom.

"That physical activity and unstructured play, those things are not luxuries for kids," said Sara Zimmerman, the technical-assistance director of the Oakland, Calif.-based Safe Routes to School National Partnership, which advocates increased physical activity for students. "That's a key part of how kids learn and how they grow."

Schools around the country have implemented policies that limit or eliminate teachers' ability to take away recess time, their efforts bolstered by district policies and state laws that place renewed emphasis on physical activity and by increased public involvement in the creation of district wellness policies.

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In Minnesota, for example, lawmakers are **considering a bill** that would prohibit schools from withholding recess time as a form of punishment. A separate bill in that state would require schools to set clear policies on how much recess time they provide to students and to publish those policies online.

At least 11 states have similar prohibitions, according to the Reston, Va.-based National Association for Sport and Physical Education.

In a 2013 analysis of wellness policies in more than 600 school districts around the country, researchers from the University of Illinois at Chicago found that 68 percent of elementary schools had no policy in place prohibiting the use of withholding of physical activity as a form of discipline during the 2010-11 school year. That's a decline from 79 percent in 2006-07.

Supporters of those changes say it's counterproductive to punish defiant or overly active children by taking away the "time to get their wiggles out," and that recess is often withheld for unrelated behaviors, like incomplete homework.

Free time also supports students' cognitive functioning by giving them a "reset button" for their brain, researchers have found.

And districts that have made the policy switch say recess gives children a chance to explore social and emotional concepts that are increasingly emphasized in the classroom—like self-awareness and respect for others.

National Momentum

"A lot of times the kids who lose physical activity are the ones who need it most," said Emily O'Winter, the wellness coordinator for Jefferson County schools in Colorado. "It can have a snowball effect."



Kaden Livingston, 8, plays during recess at Patterson International Elementary School in Lakewood, Colo., last week. Research shows children are more engaged in the classroom when they have a break for playtime.
—Nathan W. Arnes for Education Week

The 85,000-student district leaves it up to its schools to decide if recess can be withheld, Ms. O'Winter said. Many follow a model school wellness policy promoted by the district that recommends not allowing such discipline, she said.

The push for change gained momentum nationally in 2012, when the **American Academy of Pediatrics released a position paper** saying recess "should not be withheld for punitive or academic reasons."

"A growing trend toward reallocating time in school to accentuate the more academic subjects has put this important facet of a child's school day at risk," that paper said.

"Recess serves as a necessary break from the rigors of concentrated, academic challenges in the classroom," the paper continued. "But equally important is the fact that safe and well-supervised recess offers cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits that may not be fully appreciated when a decision is made to diminish it. Recess is unique from, and a complement to, physical education—not a substitute for it."

After reviewing existing research, the American Academy of Pediatrics found that many schools had lessened recess time to comply with increased academic demands, and that children attending high-poverty and urban schools are less likely than their peers in middle- and upper-income schools to receive adequate playtime.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that all elementary school students get at least 20 minutes of recess time each day.

Child-health advocates fear schools have used the implementation of new, more rigorous learning expectations, such as the Common Core State Standards, as justification for reducing the amount of time for physical activity students have during the school day.

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"We have the science that shows the importance of moving throughout the day and the impact that can have on focus, concentration, and academic performance, but, increasingly, we're having kids sit for long stretches of the day," said Laurie Whitsel, the director of policy research at the American Heart Association.

That organization and others promote research that shows the academic and emotional benefits of recess, alongside data about child obesity and fitness.

When schools limit children's time for play, "it's deleterious for their health, and it's also bad for their academic performance," Ms. Whitsel said.

"They're kind of shooting themselves in the foot."

The American Academy of Pediatrics position paper highlights research that shows young students have improved literacy scores and better cognitive functioning when they get breaks for physical activity.

Researchers have also found school climate and social-emotional benefits.

Researchers at the University of Colorado in Boulder and the University of Denver found in a 2014 study that 6-year-olds who spent more time in unstructured play showed more signs of strong executive functioning and decisionmaking skills. Those skills are supportive of strong social relationships, which researchers have linked to academic success throughout a student's school career.

Champions of child exercise expect more schools to consider revising their policies related to physical activity, including recess, as they upgrade school wellness plans to comply with the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.

Since 2004, all schools that participate in the National School Lunch program have been required to have wellness plans that outline how they handle student nutrition and physical education.

That requirement was updated under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act to add more chances for public participation and transparency in crafting and updating wellness plans. A proposed rule, drafted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to comply with the act, is expected to be finalized soon.

Teacher Resistance

Model school wellness policies drafted by several advocacy organizations include prohibitions on withholding physical activity for disciplinary reasons. Supporters hope that increased input from parents will lead schools to adopt that recommendation.

Such input has already influenced many communities.

In New Haven, Conn., for example, district leaders updated their policies to provide a minimum amount of required recess time and a rule against using recess for discipline after parents spoke up.

But, even as parents have pushed for such changes, some teachers have resisted them.

Eliminating restrictions on recess come as many schools are implementing other changes to their discipline policies to reduce the use of suspensions and other forms of exclusionary discipline.

When parents in Berkeley, Calif., pushed for a policy to eliminate withholding recess last year, teachers pushed back.

There are times when taking away recess time "is the logical and natural response to behavior," Cathy Campbell, the president of the Berkeley Federation of Teachers, told the school board at a November meeting.

"We don't want it to be impossible for teachers to use this tool," she said, "because there are times when it is absolutely the right tool."

The board eventually passed a policy that maintains the ability of teachers to restrict recess time for a maximum of 10 minutes per day after first considering other disciplinary alternatives and providing a verbal warning.

Ms. O'Winter of the Jefferson County district said she understands that some schools may be reluctant to take a discipline option off the table.

But "there's a growing understanding that it's damaging to withhold physical activity from children, for disciplinary reasons or for makeup work," she said.

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After the USDA finalizes its new regulations for school wellness plans, she hopes to update Jefferson County's plan, possibly considering a ban on withholding recess in the process.

"I see it," she said, "as an opportunity for a big change."

Coverage of school climate and student behavior and engagement is supported in part by grants from the Atlantic Philanthropies, the NoVo Foundation, the Raikes Foundation, and the California Endowment. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.

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[MassDad](#)

Score: 2

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12:30 PM on April 16, 2015

It's about time! Good lord it is like these folks don't understand kids. My youngest son used to have recess taken away for "wiggling" too much in his seat or at circle time. Literally, the punishment was they had to line up against a wall at recess where all the kids could see them (because the Guidance Counselor at Markham Elementary used to love to not only punish kids but humiliate them). If you looked, almost every kid against the wall had ADD/ADHD.

1 reply



[Elementary T.](#)

Score: 0

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8:53 PM on April 16, 2015

I would receive notes from parents, "My child did not finish his homework last night. Would you please take his recess away?"

Yeah, right. I was to punish the child at school because

HOMEwork wasn't completed? Never did.

It is time to give more time to recess. The unstructured play is needed.



Nancy@pasco

Score: 1

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10:21 AM on April 17, 2015

I'm curious about what other teachers do for consequences of unacceptable behavior during class. Any creative ideas? I've settled on extra laps around the playground. It's activity, but isn't interactive with classmates, so, it's not a workable solution. What can be done inside the classroom to alleviate behavior disruptions?



holly hart

Score: -1

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11:36 AM on April 17, 2015

Discipline models based on punishment and rewards do not work long term. Models that build an internal rather than external locus of control work better long term. (Glaser, Gossen, Curwin and Mendler)

Research on the importance of recess and movement is clear. It is vital.

Another change needed is to move recess after lunch. Kids eat a better lunch in an appropriate time frame when this is done. The current model of recess after lunch encourages kids to gobble down food or not eat in order to have the thing they often love the most, recess. This simple change works wonders and only needs a schedule change for lunch workers to achieve.



DrM in Denver

Score: 1

Report Abuse

1:05 PM on April 17, 2015

To those of you who are in favor of a ban on withholding recess for antisocial behavior, you clearly have some new ideas about how to shape student behavior. Please list 5 consequences that you would consider appropriate for each of the following behaviors that are common at our Middle school.

Please keep in mind that our budgets in California are very limited and there will be very little ability to hire additional staff to administer any consequence that you devise.

Remember, we shouldn't suspend them because they will lose instructional time. We can't demand that parents meet with us because they may need to work and/or they have the right to refuse to show up. We can't limit their video game time or their TV/cell phone time. We cannot insist that parents give permission for the child to meet with our mental health counselors and besides that meeting would take the child away from instruction or from recess.

1. Students who are failing more than one subject and do not show up for free tutoring at lunch, after school and on Saturdays. (5 possible consequences please)
2. Students who use hate language or other bullying speech towards their classmates. (5 possible consequences please)
3. Students who bring contraband such as e-cigarettes to school. (5 possible consequences please)
4. Students who jump the fence to leave campus while using a pass to the bathroom. (5 possible consequences please)

 3 replies



wpewen

Score: 0

[Report Abuse](#)

9:15 PM on April 18, 2015

Where do they do this? When I was a kid in California public schools in the 1960's this was NEVER done. Not even discussed. We had a relatively homogeneous, middle class population. We did not have any type of physical restrictions except resting our heads quietly on the desk to settle down, or a trip to the principal for something like talking too much. Remembering how kind all but one of my teachers were, seems like they would have been aghast at something like this. They knew how important physical movement is for children.



DrM in Denver

Score: 0

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11:50 PM on April 18, 2015

wpewen replied to my post with:

"From your description, you have some overwhelming problems at your school-what is the actual frequency of these incidents?

Also, you speak of limiting students tv/video game/cell phone time. These are not activities going on at school, are they? Do you have "phone time" for kids? TV/video games are definitely not for school."

In regards to phone/video time, I meant that these are home-based privileges and so we cannot act as parents might and say "Go to tutoring or no video games for you."

As to overwhelming, NOPE, this is very typical of schools that serve at-risk kids. Our school is rated by parents and MUCH safer than other local public schools. Frequency of these issues is daily for struggling students who won't go to tutoring, weekly for incidents of bullying, monthly for contraband and about once a year for something like jumping the fence. Unlike other schools within a 2 mile radius, we have been able to limit violence on campus, such as fist fights to once every three years or so. But, at other local schools, similar violence is at least a monthly occurrence.

So, I ask again, what should we do instead of taking away recess?

 1 reply



edugal

Score: 1

[Report Abuse](#)

3:52 PM on April 19, 2015

I use the -5 system for my fifth graders. They receive a 25 minute daily recess period, and it's amazing how missing the first five minutes of recess can impact behavior.



CGregory

Score: 0

[Report Abuse](#)

9:28 AM on April 20, 2015

While I agree that having that "break" in the day is important, as a teacher I find that I need to bring students in at lunch (denying them recess) to do the work that is NOT being done at home. Homework is a crucial aspect of the learning process, when students get the review and practice that they need to learn the concepts being taught in their classes. Students that don't do homework generally don't perform well on tests. The only way I can get some students to do their homework is by denying them recess and bringing them in at lunch (oh, and for the record, I haven't had a lunch period all by myself since September). Thanks to our lovely governor here in NY, my CAREER is riding on these kids performing well on tests, showing that learning is happening. The only way for me to ensure that the students are getting the review and practice homework provides is by bringing them in at lunch. I honestly don't know what I would do if this wasn't an option for me anymore...



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