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## Impact of Extended Recess: A Grounded Theory Study

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## Impact of Extended Recess: A Grounded Theory Study

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# Impact of Extended Recess: A Grounded Theory Study

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## Abstract

Existing literature has established the benefits of recess and physical activity for children. In response, more schools in the United States are implementing, or even requiring, extended recess time for students. With these policy changes, it is important to understand the impact upon students, faculty, and staff. The following study used the shared experience of three elementary schools in the southern United States who recently implemented extended recess. Semi-structured focus groups with administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and students from three elementary schools were included in this pilot study. A grounded theory approach was utilized, and findings confirmed the known benefits of recess but also enhanced understanding of the process, which included the challenges involved as well as the importance of stakeholder feedback. Recommendations are included for the professional school counselor which are applicable in both, the United States and internationally.

*Keywords:* school counseling, recess, student success, elementary schools

The Centers for Disease Control ([CDC], 2020) defines recess as “regularly scheduled period in the school day for physical activity and play that is monitored by trained staff or volunteers” (n.p.). While the construct of recess has been a part of the school system in the United States for over a century, there have been increasing degrees of legislative impact on what recess looks like in elementary schools. Many states have passed legislation to set a daily requirement of time for physical activity and unstructured recess time (Arkansas Unstructured Social Time in Schools Act, 2019; Harper 2019; Shammass, 2019). Members of state legislatures are increasingly prioritizing physical activity in students and viewing extended time at recess as an opportunity to do so, citing the benefits of recess for students established in literature. However, little is known about the impact of extending recess in schools from stakeholders’ perspectives.

## Recess as a Beneficial Activity

Recess has been correlated with increased physical activity, improved memory and attention, reduction of disruptive behaviors in the classroom, and increased social and emotional

development in students (Carlson et al., 2015; CDC, 2020; Hillman et al., 2014). Children also display a significant increase in attentiveness following both indoor and outdoor recess periods (Brez & Sheets, 2017; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). Moreover, students who spend more time being physically active display enhanced social problem-solving skills and academic outcomes (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001). Administrators are better able to advocate for the benefits of required recess to State legislatures with an awareness of this research (Scudieri & Schwager, 2017). The professional school counselor can be also instrumental in this advocacy as they can convey the social emotional value of play and physical activity.

## History of Recess in the United States

Recess first became a part of the public school systems in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century (Pellegrini, 2005). G. Stanley Hall (1907) is credited as a pivotal founder of the Child Study Movement around this time as he believed play to be an integral part of childhood. At this same time, playgrounds began to emerge in urban neighborhoods to socialize children and were soon added to the school structure and utilized during recess to enhance this cognitive and social development (Pellegrini, 2005). For the next several decades, recess became an engrained aspect of the school systems in the United States. After the CDC defined recess, it was included in the School Health Policies and Practices Study 2000 (CDC, 2014). Although recess was recognized as a valued aspect of elementary education by the professional organizations, implementation was left to individual schools, leading to wide variations in implementation

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act was passed, emphasizing the evaluation of students of all ages through standardized testing (McMurrer, 2007). With the increased focus on testing to receive funding, there was a 20% reduction in recess time offered to students after the passage of No Child Left Behind to spend more time in direct instruction (McMurrer, 2007). Although this change in schedule did not result in higher test scores (Henley et al., 2007), the reduction in recess time has still been in effect for the past several years. Only recently state legislatures have allowed research on recess to shape its newest policies. These changes in school policy are forcing administration to adjust to meet these re-

quirements, but more evidence is needed to inform their decisions.

The CDC and the Society of Health and Physical Educators ([SHAPE]; CDC & SHAPE, 2017) co-authored strategies for implementing recess. They identify five strategies for effective implementation of recess: make leadership decisions, communicate and enforce behavioral and safety expectations, create an environment supportive of physical activity during recess, engage the school community to support recess, and gather information on recess. It is essential for administrators to use research-informed strategies in new policy implementation to ensure students can reap the benefits of recess (CDC & SHAPE, 2017). Suleman et al. (2021) completed a qualitative study examining the implementation of these strategies for recess at an urban, inner-city school. This was one of the only studies that utilized qualitative research and focused on the impact of planning and implementing recess within a school. The themes identified in the study followed the suggestions from the CDC and SHAPE (2017) to make leadership decisions, behavioral and safety expectations, create a supportive environment, engage the school community, and gather information. They point out that it is crucial to include all stake holders (administrators, teachers, recess support personnel, and students) when planning and implementing recess (Suleman et al., 2021). The professional school counselor is often a bridge between parents, teachers, and administrators; thus, they could be an ideal fit for the role of planning and implementing recess.

### **International Approach to Recess**

The value of recess is also apparent in other countries. Studies around the world, including Australia, Canada, and Turkey, cite recess as benefitting students academically, cognitively, socially, and physically (Hyndman et al, 2017; McNamara et al, 2017; Özkal, 2020). An international survey was conducted on recess by the Association for Childhood Education (Szecsi, 2006) that included Austria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Russia, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Panama, and Peru. All countries described recess as free play with little teacher interaction, typically taking place outdoors. European countries included in the study also reported that they offered 45 minutes of class separated by at least 10 minutes of recess. Latin American countries reported having recess every two hours. Across the globe, recess is viewed as a pivotal part of the education provided to children. It is therefore crucial to offer administration insight into how to implement recess policies effectively.

### **School Counselor and Recess**

The school counselor plays an important role within the school of advocating for student needs with administrators. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model has four areas that are focused on creating a school counseling program that addresses the needs of all students (ASCA, 2019) including Define, Manage, Deliver, and Assess. The Define section of the ASCA National Model focuses on defining the standards for students and for the

school counseling program. Within this section there are the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors that assist the school counselor in clearly defining the standards for the student and school counselor. There are six ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for the students (students' psychological attitudes and belief in self) and 29 Behaviors (student success). There are three categories within the Behaviors section: Learning Strategies, Self-Management Skills, and Social Skills (ASCA, 2019). There are also ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors specific to the school counseling program with seven Mindsets (professional school counselors' beliefs about students) and 24 Behaviors (demonstrated by the professional school counselor toward students). There are three categories within the behavior section: Professional Foundation, Direct and Indirect Services, and Planning and Assessment (ASCA, 2019). Clearly these areas are connected to the mental and physical wellbeing of students as related to school success. As previously mentioned more time spent for recess has shown benefits for students in these areas.

In addition to the Define section in the ASCA National Model, there is Manage. Within the Manage section the school counseling program has suggested tools and assessment that can be utilized to assess, inform, and design their program (ASCA, 2019). An additional section of the ASCA National Model is Deliver. Within the Deliver section the school counseling program has direct (classroom lessons, individual planning, counseling, groups, etc.) and indirect services (collaboration, consultation, and referrals). The ASCA National Model recommends that professional school counselors spend 80% of their time doing direct services and 20% indirect services (ASCA, 2019). The final section of the ASCA National Model is Assess. Within this section the school counseling program utilizes assessments to understand the needs of the school and if their services are having an impact on students (ASCA, 2019). The ASCA National Model provides guidance on how to develop an effective school counseling program and ways that a school counselor can advocate for the needs of their students. Advocacy is an important part of the professional school counselor's identity and a natural way for them to advocate for the benefits of extended recess. The professional school counselor may also assess these benefits through social emotional assessments and the academic data that they have readily available.

Furthering the definition of a professional school counselor's role within a comprehensive school counseling program ASCA identified Multitiered Systems of Support (MTSS) that focus on the academic, career, and social emotional development of students (ASCA, 2021). The MTSS has Response to Interventions and positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports that are focused on all students. The MTSS has three tiers, (Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3) that focus on indirect and direct services to create evidence-informed interventions and supports to assist all students in academic, career, and social emotional development. Each tier has a different focus, with Tier 1 focusing on interventions for classroom instruction and schoolwide programming. Tier 2 focuses on interventions for small groups and individual counseling, consultation, and collaboration. Tier 3 focuses on indirect services such as consultation, collaboration, and facilitation of referrals (ASCA,

2021). Ziomek-Daigle et al. (2016) suggest that infusing MTSS into a comprehensive school counseling program allows for the professional school counselor to focus on student achievement and behavior, collaboration, data, evidence informed practices, and social justice. ASCA has identified multiple ways that professional school counselors can create, manage, and assess comprehensive school counseling programs that focus on the needs of all students.

Both conceptual and research articles have addressed the important role a school counselor can play in facilitating nature exposure to students. Flom and colleagues (2011), on the role of the professional school counselor, advocates for more time outdoors to improve student's mental health. They discussed the health benefits, social-emotional benefits, and cognitive benefits of children getting more time outdoors in nature. They posit that because of the benefits for students to be outdoors in nature, it falls within the school counselor's role as under the Define, Manage, and Deliver sections of the ASCA National Model as indirect service to advocate and protect recess time for students with teacher, administrators, and staff (Flom et al., 2011). Additionally, Swank and Swank (2013) proposed a school counseling gardening program focused on utilizing the natural environment to engage students in a growth focused activity to assist in their social emotional development. Swank and Shin (2015a) completed a mixed methods study on the impact of the gardening program. Results showed that participants felt happier, and their self-concept increased. In addition to this study, Swank and Shin (2015b) published a conceptual article on incorporating nature into Child-Centered Play Therapy in schools. Swank et al. (2015) completed a single-case research design assessing the impact of nature-based Child-Centered Play Therapy in schools and found that problem behaviors for two of the four participants decreased from the treatment.

Reese et al. (2019) infused EcoWellness into a school counseling program. EcoWellness is the infusion of nature into discussions of wellness and using nature as healing (Reese & Myers, 2012). EcoWellness was originally defined by three dimensions: access to nature, environmental identity, and transcendence (Reese & Myers, 2012). It was then expanded to include seven dimensions: physical access, sensory access, connection, protection, preservation, spirituality, and community connectedness (Reese et al., 2015). They connect the seven EcoWellness dimensions to the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors and suggest that, because of the positive impacts associated with students being in nature, school counselors should incorporate nature into their school counseling program. Lastly, Rian and Coll (2021) had a professional school counselor implement a nature-based classroom lesson program with 60 students in third and fourth grade. They had an experimental group ( $n = 34$ ) and control ( $n = 26$ ). They utilized the Beck Anxiety Inventory – Youth (Beck et al., 2005) and Connection to Nature Index (Cheng & Monroe, 2012) to assess the impact of the study. Results from the study showed that participants in the experimental group had decreased anxiety and a stronger connection to nature; however, there was not a statistically significant group difference. Rian and Coll (2021) suggest that professional school counselors begin to infuse nature into the school counseling program

to address student social emotional needs. Although there has been limited empirical research completed on infusing nature into school counseling programs, studies have shown improvements in participants. Advocating and creating a school counseling program that includes access to nature is an important role that falls within the ASCA National Model and can address the Mindsets and Behaviors (Flom et al., 2011; Reese et al., 2019; Rian & Coll, 2021; Swank & Swank, 2013; Swank & Shin, 2015a; Swank & Shin, 2015b; Swank et al., 2015). Although their article is a conceptual article with case studies, there is research to support the efficacy of recess time for children.

### Function of Research Surrounding Recess Duration

Literature has been published surrounding the academic (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001) and developmental (Hyndman et al, 2017; McNamara et al, 2017; Özkal, 2020) benefits of recess. However, literature surrounding the variables within recess that result in these benefits is limited. Approaches to recess duration and setting vary significantly across the United States (Beni, 2016). Higher physical activity levels are seen in outdoor recess (Tran et al., 2013). However, further research is needed to clarify differences in benefits between indoor and outdoor recess. The current study set out to clarify benefits associated with extended recess duration and offer insight into the process of implementation. The overall goal was to gain an understanding of the impact of implementing extended recess in order to inform stakeholders and future policies. Providing data to fill this gap enables teachers and counselors to continue to advocate for extended recess times and the benefits associated with it.

### Method

The following study sought to understand how students, teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators were impacted by the newly extended recess required by state legislators. A qualitative approach was utilized in order to gain a deeper understanding from multiple perspectives, including students, teachers, para's and administrators. Previous studies evaluating the impact of recess have not included these multiple perspectives from personal interviews. The research question that guided the study was as follows: "What is the impact of implementing the new policy of extended recess?" A grounded theory approach allowed rich and thick descriptions of the process to create more informed understandings of experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and to advance the current knowledge of extended recess and conceptual analysis. Constant comparative method was utilized for discovering a grounded theory, combining data collection, coding, analysis, and with theoretical sampling. Grounded theory allowed for theory development as data were systemically gathered and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Researchers worked to set aside personal bias and systemically explore the data until models, concepts or theories emerged. Capturing the themes from those who have already implemented extended recess can offer insight and lead to the most effective implementa-

tion strategies to be utilized for other administrations inside and outside of the United States.

**Trustworthiness**

In the data collection, trustworthiness was established through documentation, a framework of assumptions, and researcher reflexivity (Kornbluh, 2015). Triangulation was established with semi-structured focus groups with administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, a counselor, and students from three elementary schools who were participating. Questions from all focus groups are listed in Appendix A. Data collection continued until saturation was reached. Five counseling students served as external auditors. Three were Ph.D. counseling students trained in qualitative research, one of which was a former elementary school counselor. Two were masters level students. Transcripts, codes, and emergent themes were reviewed for accuracy of the data and the interpretation of conclusions. Codes and themes were re-evaluated and edited as needed accordingly. Member checks were conducted via email to strengthen credibility and dependability. Emergent themes were compared with the original data to ensure they were empirically grounded. Feedback received was discussed with the group and guided the coding process, and adjustments made as needed.

**Procedures**

Upon IRB approval, schools were contacted, and dates set for focus groups and interviews. Informed consent was then obtained for all participants. The participating schools were visited by the two primary researchers who facilitated interviews and focus groups. The focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed using a professional transcription service. A team of researchers, which included one of the primary researchers who collected the data, read tran-

scriptions of interviews line by line and developed open, axial, and selective codes for the themes that emerged. After completing this individually with detailed notes, the rest of the research team then met to review similarities within the emergent themes. Additionally, they conducted theoretical coding utilizing concepts related to the impact of extended recess. Theoretical analysis was used to identify patterns regarding recess and its impact with researchers using memos and notes from data and the conceptual connection between the themes.

**Researchers' Position**

The researchers were assistant professors from a university in the state where the schools were located. One was a counselor education and supervision professor who was also a play therapist and licensed professional counselor with a research emphasis on play. The other researcher works in an exercise science program with a research emphasis on physical activity interventions in children and the effects of chronic and acute physical activity on educational outcomes. Both researchers believed that extended recess would be beneficial but were unsure of what would emerge from the data. They considered assumptions and inherent biases to reduce the risk of imposing their own assumptions into the data collection and interpretation.

**Participant Selection**

In May 2018, 26 schools from the Southern United States were selected to participate in Act 1062 (Arkansas Extended Recess Pilot Program, 2017) for the 2018-2019 school year. The legislation extended recess to 60 minutes per day for all students in K-4 and 45 minutes for grades 5-6 and specified that it must be unstructured physical activity where children are supervised but undirected in choice of activity. Schools

**Table 1  
Participating School Information**

	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>	<b>School C</b>
Extended recess pilot	Yes	Yes	No
Recess length	60 minutes/day split into two, 30-minute sessions	60 minutes/day split into two, 30-minute sessions	40 minutes/day split into two, 20-minute sessions
Grades	K-6	P-6	K-4
Enrollment	280 students	284 students	283 students
% Free/Reduced Lunches	69%	93%	67%
Racial composition			
White	94%	91%	86%
Hispanic	4%	4%	8%
Black	0%	0%	4%
School quality	48.48 (21 <sup>st</sup> percentile)	51.83 (31 <sup>st</sup> percentile)	55.35 (48 <sup>th</sup> percentile)

were selected for this study based on 2017-2018 school information from the Office for Educational Policy. The schools for the study received a C grade on the School Report Card, which is a school performance grade based on growth scores, achievement scores and school quality/student success indicators on standardized tests and ranges from A to F (Arkansas Department of Education Data Center, n.d.). The grade of C indicates achievement gaps.

In the year the data was gathered, 358 of 1026 schools in the state had a grade of C, which was the highest percent of all the categories (Howell, 2019). The researchers therefore selected schools with a C grade within a 90-mile radius of their university. A purposeful sample of two schools (out of 26) participating in the extended recess pilot were selected based on the school grade of C, their willingness to participate, and distance from the researchers' location. A third school, not participating in the state extended recess pilot was selected based on matched student (percentage of students with free/reduced lunch and test scores) and school characteristics (enrollment size and grades included) and location. Principals were contacted at each school. Researchers worked with the principals or identified school liaison to select potential participants (i.e., which grades and classes to recruit students and which teachers or staff to include based on recess duties). Principals selected staff that had a role in supervising recess, which varied from school to school and was primarily paraprofessionals or classroom teachers. The one counselor that participated had a personal interest in recess and often supervised and attended recess. Information letters and parent consent forms were sent home to potential students, and only those with written, informed consent participated in the focus groups. This signed informed consent was the only information shared to protect student information and thus due to the low number of minoritized students, no racial demographics were collected. Identified teachers and staff were invited to participate, and provided written, informed consent prior to participating. Of the students who participated, 44% were female, while of the adult participants, 88% were female. All procedures were approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board, prior to beginning research. One school district required and received approval from the superintendent before research activities began.

**Data Analysis**

Straussian grounded theory was used to analyze the data collected from the semi-structured focus groups (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This methodology is the most appropriate to answer the research question as it moves beyond a description of an experience to develop a theory for relationships based on the themes that emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The researchers all used grounded theory procedures during data collection, coding and interpreting results using constant comparison method during data analysis until saturation was met. Transcriptions demonstrated saturation of data, further validating the participant selection.

**Results**

Three significant themes emerged in interviewing participants about their experiences of implementing the new extended recess policy. These themes included benefits for the students, challenges to implementation, and the significance of feedback from faculty and staff. In the following sections, the three main themes the subthemes within them are discussed, including direct quotations from participants to support the identified themes.

**Benefits for Students**

One theme that emerged from participants' interviews was the benefits to the students that the new extended recess policy had. Participants reported developments in multiple areas for students, such as physical, social, and cognition. From this, researchers identified subthemes of benefits for students as: changes in physical development, changes in social development, and changes in higher order processing, including attention, creativity, and problem solving. An important awareness that emerged from the interviews with teachers and administrators was that initially, the benefits were not apparent. Students had more injuries on the playground and more visits to the nurse and they required more disciplinary action as they had little experience both with the playground equipment and in problem solving with their peers. These issues

**Table 2**  
**Focus Group Participant Information**

	<b>Student Focus Groups (grade)</b>	<b>Teacher/Para Focus Groups</b>	<b>Administrative Interview</b>
School A	7 students (3 <sup>rd</sup> & 4 <sup>th</sup> ) 7 students (5 <sup>th</sup> & 6 <sup>th</sup> )	4 teachers 1 paraprofessional	1 principal, 1 health coordinator
School B	8 students (K, 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> ) 10 students (3 <sup>rd</sup> & 4 <sup>th</sup> )	2 paraprofessionals 5 teachers	1 principal 1 counselor
School C	7 students (3 <sup>rd</sup> ) 7 students (4 <sup>th</sup> ) 11 students (5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> )	4 teachers 3 teachers	1 principal

lessened in future months as students had fewer injuries and learned to better resolve conflicts with peers. As this change occurred, the benefits became greater.

### Changes in Physical Development

A theme emerged of children's physical activity level changing in comparison to previous levels, for both individual students and classes. In considering the changes in stamina observed over the school year, a third grade teacher from school A observed, "Lot of them when we started the year, could just, I mean it was a tedious thing to make it around the playground a couple of laps, now they're running, outrunning us." Another teacher from school C observed changes in strength and coordination regarding the monkey bars on the playground, stating,

They build that body strength; they have built the coordination. Most people will not think anything about it, but we've sit and watched them all year, work, and work, and work, and work, and most of them can... they will just zip and zip back.

These physical changes were apparent to the teachers who spend time with these students daily and could make comparisons throughout the school year.

Students even observed physical changes in themselves after the time spent in recess. One student observed this increase in alertness in class by saying, "It makes us not so tired in class." Outside of class, students also recognize the overall health benefits of more unstructured play during recess. A student from school B said, "The other schools probably need to know that it's healthy for us to get more recess." Another also asserted, "Because whenever you actually exercise, your body feels healthy and happy."

These changes were also observed by administrators in the schools. Regarding students' performance on the playground monkey bars, the principal from school C observed,

But the upper body strength was huge. So, you would never see a kindergartner, first grader, even a second grader, able to go back, to go across the monkey bars, very, very few... So now, you can go out and see our kindergartners, first and second graders going back and forth.

Paraprofessionals from school A also observed these changes in students' increasing physical abilities as students spent increased time building physical capacities. One observed,

Because it's like their muscles aren't used to doing that and then they get better at it as time goes because at first it's like they don't have any agility or anything out there to do anything and then they figure it out and then they get better as the year goes on.

Overall, participants described the changes in physical development. This was noted in both student personal awareness as

well as from the adults at the school as they developed strength, coordination, and stamina through more time at recess.

### Changes in Social Development

Social development was universally recognized by stakeholders in extended recess. Especially regarding conflict resolution, the additional recess time allowed students to have more time to practice these skills in peer relationships. One third grade teacher from school B identified why she sees recess time as being so crucial to the development of conflict resolution:

So, I think that's the big difference that trying to let everything not be so structured for that reason right there. Because they don't know how to get along with each other, without somebody telling them how to get along with each other.

With this unstructured time, another teacher from school C recognized, "I think it leads to more tolerant relationships, when they learn how to play together and be together." This tolerance leads to more effective methods of solving conflict as observed by administration. The school administrator from school A noted, "We had a lot of hitting and kicking and those types of things at recess last year. And we don't see those too much this year." The principal from school C also recollected an experience,

One of the students even said, one of the leadership team students, even said something about, "Well, if I have any type of conflict with a student during the first recess, then it doesn't really carry into my classes like it did before." Because it did, the year before that. Instead, they wait until recess time and then they can talk it out and resolve it. And they may not, and you know, these are just simple things that may not need an adult to be involved with them.

Additional recess time was correlated with improved conflict resolution skills in students by participants.

In addition to conflict resolution skills, participants also reported inclusivity of students being a part of the extended recess time. One student participant from school B exemplified this inclusivity by saying, "I feel like the people who are playing the game they should let everyone play if they want to play because if they didn't it would hurt the other person's feelings they only want to play with them." One of the fourth grade teachers from school A noted, "They're not as cliquy because they can play with everybody, and they have time to play with everybody. They're not as cliquy as they have when they have just 20 minutes." A teacher from school C observed, "Non-players and the ones who usually don't get included are starting to join some of those games." Students became more inclusive in their play during additional recess time.

### Changes in Higher Order Processing

In addition to the previous subthemes, changes in higher order processing were identified by the researchers. Participants had reported that there was an increase in cognition for the students from the extended recess. Within this subtheme, attention, creativity, and problem solving were reported by participants as areas where they saw an increase.

**Attention.** Teachers made note of students' increased attention capacity in class. One teacher from school B reported,

Getting them outside to where they can just run and scream, that really helps them when they get back in class. Okay, they got that energy out they can focus more... so yeah, I have noticed a difference. It's much better.

The release of energy that recess provided allowed students to return to the classroom more engaged in the learning process. Another fourth grade teacher from school A noted, "Learn how to use your recesses - run, play, scream, holler, jump up and down, wiggle, get it out of your system, and when they come back, they're ready to learn." Students noticed this change that the release in energy offer them as well. One student from school C said, "It makes you more energetic and stuff for the next class and stuff and keeps you awake." On an administrative level, this change was observed as a principal from school A stated,

I think it is an energy release, so it's not all pent up just and that's all they get. So they can go out and run off a little bit of steam and then come back in and then run off a little more steam. So I think that helps, I really do. Especially our littles.

The freedom to release their energy that recess offered allowed students to return to the classroom with more focus and engagement.

**Creativity.** Another area of expanded higher order processing for students was seen in their increase in creative activity. In observing her students at play, a teacher from school C noticed, "Sometimes you can watch them invent games and different things to do with each other, rather than just sitting and doing an art page in the classroom." Another teacher saw this creativity as a difference in the students receiving extended recess as compared to her former students. She said, "For mine it was either they played basketball or soccer, but now, like she said, they're starting to make up their own games and to do different things. But before mine were just those two things or nothing." Students were eager to share games they had created during their recess time. One student from school C shared, "We were talking to each other about four square, and I thought, 'Hey, how about we make up our own little game of four square?'" The school principal participant from school C observed this game and shared her perception,

Two or three of them had come up with this extended four square game that had all these different rules and levels that they were monitoring themselves. So, the creativity has been huge now because they have time to play a full game of something.

The extended recess time allowed students' creativity to flourish as they had sufficient time to develop new ways of playing with one another.

**Problem Solving.** In interviewing the students, researchers noticed a theme of problem solving regarding the issues that students observed in the extended recess. Students had ideas of how to improve the conditions of the playground to get more use out of it and to make it safer. One student suggested, "I would take the ones that are swinging off and put the ones that are stable. When kids do stuff, they won't fall off." Another from school C shared his idea of providing additional shade, "Maybe like a thing to where if it's really hot, kids could sit under there for a minute or two and then come back out to play." Students also had ideas of how to improve the transition from recess back into the classroom. A student participant from school B recommended, "I think we should have a five-minute break right after recess in our classroom." Students with extended recess displayed effective problem-solving capabilities, in which they were able to identify issues with additional recess time and viable solutions to these issues.

### Challenges to Implementation

In addition to the benefits to overall student development, there were several themes regarding the challenges to implementation of these changes in the school for students regarding scheduling, equipment, discipline alternatives, and inclement weather. These challenges were primarily reported by teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals as students were less privy to the logistical aspects of their school day.

### Scheduling

Extended recess presented schools with challenges of fitting extra time into their schedule and optimizing their limited space for recess. A teacher from school A emphasized how crucial scheduling is to this change by saying, "I think a lot of it being successful is just our schedule in general." Teachers from school C reported gaps either being too long or too short in between the two recesses. One said,

Because I've got them in that in between hour. It is a few minutes trying to get them back in... And trying to get them settled back in, and then get going, and then they know they're going right back outside.

Another third grade teacher from school B claimed, "Our lunch is at 12, and so to go from 8 to 12 with no break it's

really hard.” This strain of scheduling was felt on an administrative level, the school principal from school B reported,

Yes, because we have lunch starting at 10:50, and goes till 12:20. Yeah, you got to get your 90 minutes of literacy in, you got 60 minutes of math, you got to get some science and social studies 30 minutes, you got to have your art, which is 40 minutes, your PE, which is so many minutes in a week, you got to have your music, and your media library. So computers. There's a lot, that's not even counting those who must go to the resource room for anywhere from 180 to 360 minutes, and then your interventions.

With many needs in such a limited timeframe, it is difficult to allot the necessary time for extended recess. Paraprofessionals reported a lack of time spent with students due to these constraints. One paraprofessional from school A claimed, “Our intervention times are real short this year. We're not seeing probably as many groups as we need to.” Scheduling was a challenge to those implementing extended recess due to the demands for other activities of the school day.

### Equipment

Additional recess time also resulted in increased equipment use, which depleted the equipment. A third grade teacher from school B reported the following, “Occasionally some will start basketball, but it also has to do with how many balls are available which is ... 'cause they always end up over the fence or on the roof.” Students were also quick to note deficiencies they saw in playground equipment. One student from school C shared her observations around tire swing play, “Because a couple of people like to go there and hog it up and stay and want the perfect pusher, so they sit on it and wait for like two hours, till it's time to go in.” The school principals from school C shared how she was making this a priority by saying, “We're so outdated in our equipment. So that's the biggest push I'm trying to work on now, is get two complete new playgrounds and equipment.”

### Discipline Alternatives

Another challenge regarding implementation reported by participants involved the mandatory nature of extended recess. Limiting recess time had traditionally been utilized as a disciplinary measure; the required recess presented an issue for those needing consequences for misbehavior at school. One paraprofessional from school A asserted, “My main concern is we're not even allowed to discipline them now.” Schools were exploring discipline alternatives. A fourth grade teacher from school A explained one of these new strategies, “We're not allowed to make them walk or something at recess. We can have a thinking time.” However, many teachers had difficulty transitioning to these alternatives. The school principal from school A reported, “Well, we used to walk laps, but ... And I still have teachers that want to give that as punishment. But I try to deter that.” Limiting recess time had a history of

being utilized as a discipline strategy, which made it difficult for schools to adjust.

### Inclement Weather

Another challenge reported by participants included inclement weather, which prevented students from enjoying the unstructured play involved in outdoor recess. Some students expressed discomfort in extreme weather. One student from school C suggested, “Not having to go outside when it's hot outside.” Paraprofessionals who supervised recess reported student discomfort in this weather as well. One from school A said, “Because once they get hot, they just sit down at the picnic tables and just sit there.” Another paraprofessional recollected, “In the wintertime, they were freezing by the time it was thirty minutes.”

Additionally, schools were often forced to have indoor recess in inclement weather, which also presented unique challenges due to limited space and activities. A third grade teacher from school B noted, “Rainy days can sometimes be a ... Sometimes that's a headache.” Another first grade teacher from school A attributed this difficulty to the limited space available in schools by saying, “If we had a place to go, that would be great, so they could do some free play.” According to a school administrator from school C,

Our biggest challenge has been the rainy day and sub recess, because we want to go ahead and continue to give them that hour of recess and keep them on schedule with it, but we use our safe room, our gym, on days when it's available. We use our cafeteria when it's available, but it's only for a small amount of time.

Inclement weather posed a unique challenge to the experience of extending recess for schools. There were often space and activity needs that exceeded the schools' capacity.

### Collection of Feedback

Another important theme that emerged from the interviews was the significance of collecting feedback from students, teachers, and paraprofessionals in adjusting to the challenges of extended recess implementation. Teachers and paraprofessionals who faced more logistical challenges with extended recess, especially regarding discipline alternatives, were less involved in the process of implementation. A paraprofessional from school A said, “We were just told what to do.” Another teacher from school A reported more challenges stating, “And I think some of the teachers were a little bit reluctant, but we went ahead and got all the paperwork filled out and got it started just to see how it would impact the kids.” This lack of teacher and paraprofessional investment appeared to be correlated with more challenges to implementation.

Conversely, schools that appeared to value teacher and paraprofessional input and feedback reported fewer challenges with implementing extended recess. The school principal from school C acknowledged,

I think they all pretty much like it but there's a lot of positives with it, and there's a few small challenges, and that's what we call them, and we're hoping that the summary from this will help us to better prepare next school year.

She also referenced the value of promoting teacher investment, stating, "They don't have to do all of the recess duties, and so I'll tell you that is definitely a buy-in for them because they can use that time as additional planning for different things." A health coordinator from school C shared her experience with her school's principal, "She works with her teachers and takes that buy-in information and makes them a part of figuring the schedule out, and I think that had a huge impact." Teachers at schools that valued this feedback appreciated the support they felt from administration. One teacher from school C reported, "We had that one section that is just too close together, and... she was trying to figure out how to separate them." Even when schools experienced logistical challenges, this felt sense of support was notable for teachers. These schools reported initiating ways to receive feedback from students, including the development of a student leadership team. The schools with less logistical challenges were found to value feedback from those on the frontlines of implementation and utilized it to improve their process.

### Extended Recess Impact Theory

The themes that emerged from the data revealed the student benefits of extended recess including physical and social development and improved higher order processing. However, this shift in policy also involved challenges to implementation, such as scheduling, equipment, discipline alternatives, and inclement weather. The last identified theme was the significance of feedback from faculty and staff, which focused on including more voices in the decision making regarding how to implement extended recess. To maximize the benefits of additional recess time, school administration should seek teacher and paraprofessional feedback and ideas to increase their investment and to be aware of logistical challenges to implementation to minimize their effects prior to implementation. This theory is displayed in the following model (see Figure 1).

### Discussion

The results of this study confirm the benefits of extended recess found in previous literature including marked improvements in academic performance, physical activity, and social emotional development (Carlson et al., 2015; CDC, 2020; Hillman et al., 2014). In previous studies on extended recess, participants report improvements in student's physical condition including more stamina, coordination, and strength (Frost et al., 2018), improved conflict resolution skills and increased inclusivity (CDC, 2020), and improvements in academic performance, including increased attention span, increased displays of creativity and applied problem solving within the classroom (Hillman et al. 2014). In addition to this, these results support Suleman et al.'s (2021) results of there

being issues with planning and implementing recess. Specifically, the logistical challenges, communication issues, and discipline alternatives to taking away recess (Suleman et al., 2021). Furthermore, these results support previous studies in which professional school counselors infused nature into a school counseling program (Swank & Swank, 2015a; Swank et al., 2015; Rian & Coll, 2021). This study also highlighted the fact that the benefits were not immediately apparent but rather took time as the students were not accustomed to playing on the equipment or having non directed social experiences in which they could learn conflict resolution. This is an important finding because some schools may want to discontinue extended recess due to the student injuries and discipline required of those supervising.

The study involved interviews and feedback from all stakeholders including teachers, paraprofessionals, a counselor, and administrators which has not been explored in previous research. While the experience and demographics of the interviewees was not systematically documented, anecdotally, it represented a wide range of experience, although the three schools were homogenous in racial demographics due to selection matching to increase internal validity. In addition, the present study also revealed barriers involved in implementing the extended recess policy as well as the need for professional school counselors to serve as leaders in the implementation of such changes.

### Implications for School Counselors

Differing levels of logistical challenges were reported for each school, and the observed differences may be due to school resources such as funds as well as staff time and energy. In looking at differences between the schools, the schools that report fewer logistic challenges are more sensitive to feedback from teachers and paraprofessionals. In addition to asking for this type of input, administrators report following through by making the suggested changes when information was received. These findings highlight the necessity of administrators gathering and listening to feedback from staff to maximize the benefits of proposed policy changes such as extended recess prior to and during implementation. Intentional planning is key to the success, along with ongoing conversations that result in needed adaptations.

A relationship exists between the emerging themes. The principals chose to participate in extended recess without input from their faculty and staff. The policy was put into effect at the beginning of the school year, with little group discussion or planning which led to several logistical challenges as previously described. When administrators received feedback and appeared to value teacher and paraprofessional input, they reported fewer challenges with implementing extended recess. Optimal benefits occur when administrators are intentional in seeking feedback and planning as a group for the implementation of extended recess. This offers discussion for potential issues as well as problem solving how to address them prior to implementation rather than trying to resolve them as they occur.

This is a prime opportunity for administrators to call upon the expertise of their professional school counselor to help

with the advocacy for and implementation of extended recess as well as other types of positive policy change. Professional school counselors are the experts in social emotional learning changes and may be in the best position to help implement such changes and gather needed feedback from staff (Bowers et al., 2015). With their awareness of the social emotional functioning of children, professional school counselors are best equipped to advocate for extended recess; but are often under-utilized in this area and have more demands placed on them for administrative tasks. Specific suggestions are included in the following section for professional school counselors.

It is essential to equip administrators with best practices for policy changes in extending recess as policies are being adapted by states. Especially in an educational climate with increasing teacher turnover rates, these practices should emphasize the significance of strong administrative leadership, which has been shown to be a mitigating factor for teacher turnover (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). By establishing best practices and utilizing them within schools, administrators are less likely to be weighed down by the logistical challenges of implementation. School counselors are the best equipped in schools to advocate for extended recess and facilitate policy feedback from teachers and staff to administration as a part of their leadership and collaboration roles. This advocacy allows them to focus on the success of the students as it pertains to the benefits of recess.

### Limitations and Future Research

Limitations for this study included, only one professional school counselor participated, small sample sizes, and there was very little racial diversity among participants, with all of them being from the same state in the United States. More input is needed into the impact of recess from professional school counselors. Future research should include their input as they are important to recess implementation in the school because they can use their training and expertise as social and mental health advocates to advocate for legislative and district policy changes such as extended recess. This is an appropriate role for a professional school counselor based on the recommendations from the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019). The role of the professional school counselor advocating for extended recess could fall under the Define section and Deliver section of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2019). Within the Define section, the professional school counselor would be advocating for program that would address multiple Mindsets and Behaviors for students and themselves. See Table 3 for a list of Mindsets and Behaviors for students and professional school counselors.

In addition to the Define section, the professional school counselor advocating for extended recess would fall under the Deliver section, specifically under indirect under collaboration and consultation (ASCA, 2019). The professional school counselors can facilitate gathering feedback about proposed policy changes from teachers, paraprofessionals, and even parents. Professional school counselors can gather this feedback directly and communicate with administration to facilitate needed changes to policy implementation through needs

assessment and informal feedback gathering. This allows school counselors to then take this information to administrators and help to implement the needed changes to make extended recess and other positive school policy changes more successful. These types of indirect services are part of a professional school counselor's role, is aligned with the ASCA National Model (2019). Additionally, these results provide support that advocating for extended recess would fall under Tier 1 or Tier 3 in the MTSS. Professional school counselors advocating for extended recess would be helping create and implement a schoolwide program and initiative, thus making it a Tier 1 intervention. Furthermore, the professional school counselor should be advocating and collaborating with administrators and teachers in the school, thus making it a Tier 3 intervention. These findings emphasize the importance of allowing professional school counselors the time and opportunity to participate in advocacy and implementation of policy change that is shown to improve the success of their students and school.

Future research should include evaluating the specific physical and educational benefits for students of spending more time at recess. Specific training for teachers and staff regarding what to expect with the implementation of extended recess would be helpful in mitigating some of the issues regarding scheduling, discipline, etc. This would also allow them to feel empowered as a part of the team and have a plan in place for how they will manage barriers before they occur. Further quantitative research would also be helpful related to the social emotional impact of extended recess time, evaluating the change in behaviors as well as peer interactions to support school counselors in their advocacy for extended recess. Studies evaluating changes in academics and discipline would also be helpful in supporting policy changes since these are priorities for all schools. Seeking input into these changes from parents would also be beneficial.

Larger sample sizes should be included for future research and across more schools, to examine if themes are consistent across different stakeholder groups. In conducting these interviews, researchers uncovered several logistic challenges in implementing the extended recess policy as reported by stakeholders; challenges that could potentially be mitigated with the help of professional school counselors. Logistic challenges are observed in the areas of scheduling, playground resources, disciplinary options, and inclement weather. These logistic challenges presented by teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators do not align with previous research of drawbacks to recess, which are more focused on safety and lack of supervision at recess (Simon & Childers, 2006).

Finally, the schools in this study were predominantly White, with very little racial diversity and were all located in the same state in the United States. Thus, racial demographics were not collected. In future studies, schools with more diversity should be included in order for minoritized students faculty, and staff to have a voice in the impact of extended recess. While the current study only included three schools and one counselor, future studies should examine the generalizability of these findings across more diverse schools and stakeholders. It is likely findings do not apply to other recess practices used in non-North American countries for example.

**Table 3**  
**ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors (2019) and Extended Recess**

Student or Professional School Counselor	Mindsets & Behaviors	Connection to Results
Student	M 3. Sense of belonging in the school environment	Changes in Social Development
Student	M 6. Positive attitude towards learning	Higher Order Thinking
Student	B-LS 8. Actively engage in challenging coursework	Higher Order Thinking
Student	B-LS 9. Gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decision	Changes in Social Development, Higher Order Thinking
Student	B-SS 2. Create positive and supportive relationships with other students	Changes in Social Development
Student	B-SS 5. Demonstrate ethical decision-making and social responsibility	Changes in Social Development
Student	B-SS 6. Use effective collaboration and cooperation skills	Changes in Social Development
Student	B-SS 9. Demonstrate social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment.	Changes in Social Development
Professional School Counselor	M 7. Comprehensive school counseling programs promote and enhance student academic, career and social emotional outcomes.	Scheduling
Professional School Counselor	B-BF 2. Demonstrate understanding of educational systems, legal issues, policies, research and trends in education.	Scheduling
Professional School Counselor	B-PF 8. Demonstrate advocacy in a comprehensive school counseling program.	Scheduling, Discipline Alternatives

School counseling also looks different in countries outside the United States. While the experience and demographics of the interviewees was not systematically documented, anecdotally, it represented a wide range of experience, although the three schools were homogenous in racial demographics due to selection matching to increase internal validity. Future studies, with larger sample sizes across more schools, should examine if themes are consistent across different stakeholder groups.

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### Appendix Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Administrators	Teachers/Paraprofessionals	Students
How did your school become involved in the extended recess program?	How did your school become involved in the extended recess program?	What was recess like last year?
What was recess like before the extended recess program?	What was recess like before the extended recess program?	What do you do at recess?
What are your impressions of the extended recess program after the first half of the year?	What does recess look like for your classroom?	Would you change anything about recess?
Have there been any challenges in implementing the program?	What are your impressions of the extended recess program after the first half of the year?	How do you feel after recess?
How have teachers reacted to the extended recess program?	Have there been any challenges in implementing the program?	
How have parents reacted to the extended recess program?	How have parents reacted to the extended recess program?	
How have students reacted to the extended recess program?	How have students reacted to the extended recess program?	