

# Project RECESS (Review, Evaluate, and Create Effective Strategies and Stations)

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**Abstract:** *Project RECESS (Review, Evaluate, and Create Effective Strategies and Stations) is a project designed to decrease negative behaviors at recess in a large United States public school district. This brief review summarizes the key literature guiding the development of further data collection and focuses on defining recess, academic, social, and behavioral components of recess, and brief practices for maintaining safety at recess.*

*Keywords:* recess, academics, behavior, socialization, safety

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of project RECESS (Review, Evaluate, and Create Effective Strategies and Stations) is to reduce negative behaviors at recess in a large school district in the United States. This brief proceeding reviews the literature guiding the data collection process and intervention selection in the schools involved in the project. Overarching themes discussed include the purpose of recess itself, academic benefits of recess, behavioral and social components of recess, and practices for maintaining safe recess.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF RECESS?

The seemingly simple question that guided our literature review led us to different answers, depending on the person or organization being asked. This question is important to consider, because the answers guide current research conducted in the field as well as interventions one may select when designing a recess period (Massey et al., 2019). The CDC states recess is a scheduled time for physical activity, not going beyond the physical health benefits which recess provides

(CDC, 2017). Teachers and administrators report that recess is a time for unstructured play, social time with their peers, an opportunity to improve relationships and social skills outside of class, and a time to release energy and stress to refocus in class (Beard, 2018). When students are asked, they simply say it's a time for them to choose their own activities and socialize with their peers, as they oftentimes do not have as much choice during the school day as they would like (Prompona, Papoudi & Papadopoulou, 2020). Taken together, three different groups give three different answers on what the purported "purpose" of recess is. While there are broad similarities between the three, they are also distinct from one another which suggests there may be stark differences in how schools approach designing recess.

#### **ACADEMIC BENEFITS OF RECESS**

If a school is looking to increase academic achievement, one may immediately think that more instruction time may bring those results. However, there is evidence suggesting that recess can lead to improved academic outcomes in the classroom, contrary to what one may initially think when discussing the role of recess. For example, a study conducted by Brez and Sheets (2017) found that following recess, students had significantly increased sustained attention on a reading task compared to before recess. Similarly, Lund and colleagues (2017) examined schools utilizing four recesses per day against schools with one recess per day, and concluded that listening effort decreased in the afternoon compared to the morning in schools with more recesses during the day. Finally, Stapp and Karr (2018) found that following recess, more students were coded as "on-task" compared to before recess in a fifth-grade classroom. While the literature appears to support the notion of recess benefitting classroom engagement, having a higher ratio of recess time to instruction time has been shown to positively correlate to higher STAAR reading scores (Hill 2014). Overall, recess appears to improve classroom engagement in students. It can be reasoned

that if students are more engaged in the classroom, they will retain more information and thus improve their academic outcomes.

### **BEHAVIORAL COMPONENTS OF RECESS**

When discussing recess, behavior is an obvious topic to address. Many children choose to use their free time to play games that at times may or may not be safe nor appropriate. As mentioned prior, teachers and administrators report that recess is a time to release energy outside of class. If this energy is not released at recess, chances are it will be released in class which may result in undesired classroom behaviors. Thus, behavior is a consistent point of attention for recess, not only on the playground but for the classroom environment as well.

Structuring recess in some manner seems to bring out the best results for managing problematic behavior on the playground. Bleeker and colleagues (2012) reported that implementing the Playworks Program led to less teacher-reported bullying/exclusionary behavior, improved teacher perceptions of student safety at recess, less transition times, improved attention in class, better overall student behavior at recess. There is also evidence suggesting there may be long-term effects from the amount of recess students receive, starting at an early age. An analysis from the 2001-2002 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study showed that kindergarten students with “some recess” had increased Teacher’s Rating of Classroom Behavior (TRCB) scores when they were aged 8-9, compared to those who received “none/minimal” in kindergarten (Barros, Silver & Stein, 2009). While the literature as a whole and authors of this paper support the idea of more recess in schools, there may be instances where more recess may lead to more disciplinary referrals. Erwin and colleagues (2019) found that when they doubled the amount of recess in a Title I elementary school, it also increased the number of disciplinary referrals, contrary to their hypothesis. The authors noted that it may not be recess specifically to blame. They reasoned that

it was likely due to the increased window of opportunity for these behaviors to occur that led to the higher occurrences, as there were increased chances for these behaviors to occur in general. This is something to consider when designing recess interventions and when implementing a new intervention, as there may be a period of increased misbehaviors while students and staff adjust to a new routine.

### **SOCIAL COMPONENTS OF RECESS**

As discussed earlier, students report that socializing with their peers is one of the most important aspects of recess for them (Prompona, Papoudi & Papadopoulou, 2020). This is important to keep in mind, as whatever intervention one chooses to use when designing recess, the social component for students should not be neglected. As students get older, it's reported that recess becomes "breaktime" (particularly in middle school) and becomes more socially-focused than physically focused (London, 2022). Despite the obvious physical benefits of engaging in physical activity at recess, there are some students who don't like to be as active as others. These reported "low-active" students prefer recess to be used as a social time, and usually choose activities with peers who do similar levels of activity (Amelia et al., 2018). It's important to remember this as well since most recess interventions may center around some sort of physical activity, and catering to all students' play preferences ensures that all students will feel included and safe on the playground. Additionally, there are noted gender differences in the literature. Overall, girls tend to spend more time walking and socializing with peers, boys spent more time playing large-group sports with peers in both middle school and elementary school (Holmes, 2012; London, 2022; Woodfield & Nevill, 2015). Due to the importance students themselves place on socialization at recess, these social components should always be considered when selecting interventions and when conducting research.

### SAFETY AT RECESS

No matter the objective of recess, all parties can agree that maintaining a safe recess is of paramount importance and directly affects the efficacy of any kind of intervention or activity during recess. It is reported that students prefer to engage in higher risk-taking activities at recess, such as running fast, jumping off structures and roughhousing (Jerebine, 2022). While the safety of students is important and there shouldn't be a threat of serious harm or injury to themselves or others, it's also important to have a balance between maintaining safe environment and allowing students to take calculated risks at recess. Learning how to pick themselves up (literally and metaphorically) and talk situations out with peers helps develop skills of physical literacy and problem-solving that are crucial for developing into healthy, well-adjusted adults.

In terms of creating a safe environment, some evidence suggests that adults playing alongside students may increase student participation in an activity (Nieto & Wiskow, 2020). It can be reasoned that if students are participating in an adult-led activity, there may be a higher chance of safe and appropriate behaviors occurring compared to a free-choice student-led activity. As mentioned earlier, evidence supports breaking playground into zones as an effective means for setting expected behaviors, and for more effective adult supervision (Kern & Wakeford, 2007). While not the most creative solution, Positive Behavior Support Systems, such as token economies, may be useful in preventing unsafe behaviors at recess. Lewis and colleagues (2002) found that implementation of a token economy reduced negative behaviors in two out of three K-6 recesses following schoolwide PBS implementation (Lewis et al., 2002). Similarly, the "Stamp-In-Safety" program, another token economy intervention, decreased reported student conflicts, playground risk, reported injury risk, and increased adult supervision skills (Schwebel et al., 2015).

Overall, it appears that utilizing more structure during recess offers a greater chance of increasing safety on the playground.

### DISCUSSION

In sum, recess is a highly valuable time in the school day and should not be replaced or removed. The benefits of recess extend beyond their physical health into their mental health, academics, social skill development and classroom climate. When designing recess, it is important to consider all students' play preferences by offering both physical and sedentary activities, and ones that may appeal to both girls and boys alike. Having effective adult supervision and schoolwide behavior systems in place can promote safe playgrounds. Within this safe environment, students can develop physical literacy and problem-solving skills by taking calculated risks that don't serious threats for harm to self or others. While striking this balance is easier said than done, research supports the ideas presented in this brief review as effective and reasonable for most schools to achieve. No matter the objective of a recess period, the implications presented here are clear: recess is a crucial part of the school day and rightfully deserves to stay.

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