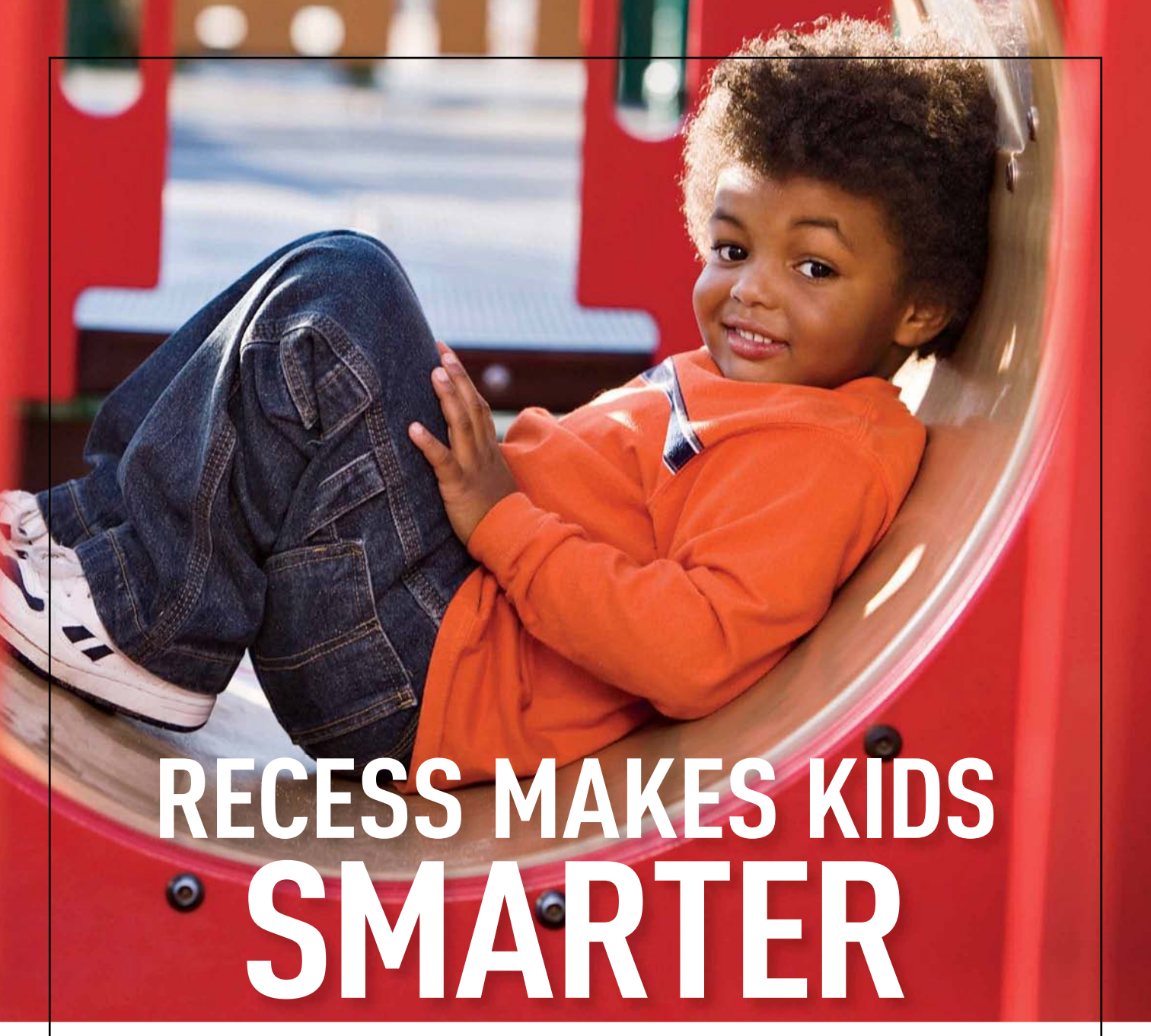

RECESS MAKES KIDS SMARTER

The benefits of recess are clear. Why are so many schools cutting back?

By Caralee Adams

All day in the classroom kids are being told: "Be quiet. Sit still. Be quiet. Sit still," says Nelly Torres, a parent of a first and a fourth grader in the Chicago Public Schools. "That's because they need their recess."

Torres, 42, still lives in the same neighborhood she grew up in. Back then, kids had recess twice a day. "It taught me how to get along with others—whites, African-Americans. Nowadays, kids don't know how to socialize among other groups," she says.

There was no recess at her children's school until last year when Torres and others lobbied and got a 10–minute break for the kids once a day. "They need to have a chance to burn off some energy," she says. Being able to run around and swing on the monkey bars helps kids better focus in the classroom, maintains Torres—and research backs that up.

Yet recess has been scaled back or cut altogether in a number of schools around the country. The trend can be traced back to the late eighties and was accelerated under No Child Left Behind. Districts under pressure to show academic progress began to squeeze as much instruction into the day as possible. Others eliminated recess because of concerns about safety, lack of supervision, and subpar playground equipment.

But all work and no play for kids has not set well with many parents—and teachers.

Now there is some momentum to bring recess back, fueled by several forces.

PHOTO: © OCEAN/CORBIS

Recess

There's the nation's obesity epidemic and First Lady Michelle Obama's spotlight on childhood health. New brain research is drawing clear links between physical activity and learning. Coaches are setting up new games on playgrounds to make recess run more smoothly. And parents like Torres are banding together with teachers to change policies to bring recess back.

WHO DECIDES?

The call on recess—to have it, or not, and for how long—is often a local school decision.

About 11 percent of states and 57 percent of districts require elementary schools to provide students with regularly scheduled recess, the most recent study by the Centers for Disease Control in 2006 shows. This is up from 4 percent of states and 46 percent of districts in 2000.

Although not mandated, 79 percent of elementary schools in the CDC survey said they provided daily recess. In 2000, it was 71 percent.

Alarmingly, say recess proponents, about two thirds of principals report taking away recess as punishment for behavior problems or not finishing work, according to "The State of Play" 2009 survey by Gallup for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "It's the kids who have trouble concentrating that need recess more than anybody else—and they are the ones less likely to get it," says Olga Jarrett, a leading researcher on recess and an associate professor of early childhood education at Georgia State University.

Recess has taken the hardest hit in urban areas. You are less likely to get recess if you are African-American (39 percent don't have recess, compared to 15 percent of whites), living below the poverty line (44 percent of poor children don't have recess versus 17 percent of others), or struggling academically (25 percent of kids who scored below the mean on a standardized test versus 15 percent of those above did not have recess), according to research in a 2003 issue of *Teachers College Record*.

3 out of 4 parents say recess should be mandatory

In Chicago, about 40 percent of the public elementary schools have scheduled recess—with each school making its own decision. "Because of the short instructional day, some school communities opt not to have recess; others lack space or facilities, or confront such issues as inadequate adult supervision," according to Frank Shuftan, a spokesperson for the Chicago Public Schools.

Nationwide, principals report that 89 percent of discipline-related problems occur at recess or lunch. One in five principals says the annual yearly progress requirements of NCLB have led to a decrease in recess, according to "The State of Play" survey.

Recess has experienced the same fate as physical education, says Francesca Zavacky, project director for the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE). "Competing priorities in schools for higher test scores have resulted in physical activities of all kinds being reduced," she says. "It comes down to dollars. The focus is not on the well-rounded student."

A PUSH FOR CHANGE

While the Chicago district encourages recess, it does not support a state mandate, like the one being pushed by Torres and other community members who are hoping the state legislature will form a task force to iron out a recess policy.

The ultimate goal in many states is to pass legislation so recess could not be eliminated by individual schools, says Melinda Bossenmeyer, founder of Peaceful Playgrounds, a company in Lake Elsinore, California, that trains educators and paints games on blacktops to encourage positive play.

"We are in a period where recess is being challenged," says Bossenmeyer, a former teacher and principal. "Now when a district tries to cut it, there is more push-back from parents."

Research showing the benefits of recess helped first-grade teacher Melissa Gerry get 15 minutes a day of "unstructured learning time" at Idlewood Elementary School in Tucker, Georgia. Now the county has such a mandate for recess at all of its elementary schools. No longer do the teachers need to "be sneaky or creative" taking kids on a long walk back from lunch to try to squeeze in some activity, says Gerry. "The kids love recess. It gives them that time to look forward to every day. Free time to relax and be kids."

TEACHER EFFORTS

To help her make her case, Gerry invited her former professor, Georgia State's Olga Jarrett, to speak at a faculty meeting.

"There is this assumption that if you keep kids working longer, they will learn more," says Jarrett. "It's misguided."

Indeed, no research supports the notion that test scores go up by keeping children in the classroom longer, but there is plenty of evidence that recess benefits children in cognitive, social-emotional, and physical ways. Research shows that when children have recess, they gain the following benefits:

- Are less fidgety and more on task
- Have improved memory and more focused attention
- Develop more brain connections
- Learn negotiation skills
- Exercise leadership, teach games, take turns, and learn to resolve conflicts
- Are more physically active before and after school

Jarrett maintains that recess has benefits over gym class. "With recess, children have choices and can organize their own games, figure out what's fair, and learn a lot of social behavior that they don't learn in P.E.," she says.

The supporters of recess are many. NASPE recommends elementary school children have at least 20 minutes of recess daily. The American Academy of Pediatrics says play is essential to children's development and cautions against

PHOTO: © MANLEY099/ISTOCK PHOTO

Recess

decreased time in school for recess. Three out of four parents say recess should be mandatory, according to a survey by the National Parent Teacher Association. Eight of 10 principals polled in 2009 say recess has a positive impact on academic learning.

GET IN THE GAME

About five years ago in Los Angeles Unified School District, there was talk of taking away recess. To fend off the move, supporters educated school board members on the latest brain research and the role of schools in fighting the obesity epidemic, says Chad Fenwick, advisor for physical education in LAUSD.

11% of states require schools to provide recess

"We had a big strategy put into place," says Fenwick, who successfully lobbied for a district recess policy that requires 55 minutes a day for lunch and recess in elementary schools. "You need to get out in front of it. Once it's set in their mind, it becomes a bigger battle."

If recess is threatened in your school, find out the protocol for making suggestions, suggests NASPE's Zavacky. Find out if there is a policy in your district—and, if not, push for one that is enforceable. Tie your argument to the ultimate goal of the administration, which is increased performance in academics.

Peaceful Playgrounds' Right to Recess Campaign has a toolkit that teachers can download to help in their lobbying efforts (peacefulplaygrounds.com/right to-recess).

IMPROVING RECESS

To restore recess, many are trying to improve supervision and the equipment available to kids.

Creating an inviting recess area helps. While play structures can cost upwards of $150,000, Bossenmeyer of Peaceful Playgrounds says blacktop can easily be painted for under $5,000 with games and activities that encourage engagement.

Such an approach cut down on the behavior problems during recess at Oak Terrace School in Highwood, Illinois, says Laurie Weil, a special education teacher there. Kids have to include everyone in games and they are learning to communicate rather than fight to settle disputes, says Weil.

Other programs, such as Playworks, provide trained coaches to oversee recess and certain physical activities at low-income, urban schools. The nonprofit, based in Oakland, California, works in 15 cities with plans to expand to 25 next year, says Cindy Wilson, a spokesperson for Playworks.

Teachers in schools that partner with Playworks report they reclaim up to 40 instructional hours a year because kids return to the classroom without the drama, as in the past. "The kids are focused and ready to learn because they aren't carrying the baggage of the soccer game running through their four-square game," says Wilson.

It's a struggle to make the case for play at a time when schools are focused on work, but proponents are trying. It's critical that children have a time to play on their own—free from adult parameters, says Richard Cohen, an early childhood professional in Arlington, Virginia. "To the outsider, recess may seem like a waste of time when you could be spending time drilling test questions. It's true in the short term," says Cohen. "But long term, what they are losing is the opportunity to develop their imagination and critical thinking skills."

Cohen is hopeful that the tide may be turning in support of play. "I don't think it's come full circle yet, but some people are waking up to the importance of recess." □

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What Teachers Say

Hundreds of members of our Facebook group, Scholastic Teachers, weighed in strongly in favor of expanded recess.

Recess is motivation for my preschoolers to do written work like tracing letters and writing between the lines, and for sitting still for story or circle time. I say we need more time for exercise and fresh air to bring about more productive students. *—Brenda Johnson*

Free play helps to develop problem solving and critical thinking skills. If we direct that time for students, how will they ever learn to do and think for themselves? Kids need to feel like they have some autonomy, or education feels more like a prison than a learning experience. *—Rebecca Webster*

In my district, recess was cut to 30 minutes PER WEEK by fifth grade, and I can speak first-hand to the discipline problems that arise because kiddos have no outlet for their energy. *—Jennifer Fortson*

Sometimes adults need to get out of the way and let kids be kids. *—Brenda Fleming Adkins*

I wonder how grown-ups would like it if their bosses took away their lunch hours and dictated how they spent it. *—Anna Monroe-Stover*