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Playing for Keeps

Research shows that recess can contribute to student achievement and the well-being of children. Unfortunately, academic pressures are pushing recess out of the school day

It's always amusing when children respond to the age-old "What's your favorite class" question with, "Recess!" Many of us answered the question the same way as the youngsters do. Recess, we know, is an essential component of the elementary school day. Research points to the importance of outdoor play and how essential it is to the well-being of students.

A 2010 study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation revealed that 96 percent of principals surveyed believe that recess has a positive impact on social development. Nearly eight in 10 principals in the same study reported that recess has a positive impact on academic achievement. Despite this, many districts have slashed recess in response to increasing pressures related to NCLB and a drive to increase test scores.

School leaders may find it hard to achieve a balance. On one hand, pressure to avoid assorted watch lists continues to intensify, budgets are stressed, and more instructional time must be found. On the other hand, schools seek to temper this high-stakes atmosphere by meeting students' affective, developmental, and social needs. A growing number of schools have chosen to eliminate or reduce recess time in an effort to increase instructional time and test scores.

To further investigate current recess trends, we at the National Program for Playground Safety, with the Educational Leadership program at the University of Northern Iowa, conducted a study of Iowa public school principals' perceptions of recess and district playground policies. A summary of the findings offers good news for schools caught between the rock and hard place of the value of recess versus achievement pressure. The findings yielded four recommendations that can easily be implemented with little to no expense.

Encourage 'I can't wait for recess!'

The first recommendation is for school boards and admin-

istrators to encourage principals and teachers to understand the body of research suggesting that recess supports learning. There is no known research suggesting that elimination or reduction of recess supports improved student learning or improves student behavior, according to the 2010 article, "The Crucial Role of Recess in Schools," published in the *Journal of School Health*.

In our study, 90 percent of responding principals believed that recess had a positive impact on achievement and 69 percent believed students listen better and concentrate more effectively after recess.

Despite the fact that common sense and research both point to the benefits recess offers students, many principals in our study reported consciously reducing recess time during the school day, often to squeeze in additional instructional time. Even though principals identified recess as important for a host of academic, social, and developmental reasons, a full 82 percent reported denying students recess as a behavioral consequence. Nearly 33 percent reported reducing recess time in response to pressure to increase test scores.

Develop sound playground policies

The second recommendation is for school boards to develop and implement sound playground policies. No responsible board would leave building maintenance and safety to chance. Boards and administrators must not assume that playgrounds remain safe and effectively maintained on their own. Playgrounds, like employees and brick-and-mortar facilities, need supervision and regular oversight.

School leaders should be proactive in ensuring well-maintained, safe, age-appropriate outdoor environments, using guidelines from established authorities, such as the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). Rather than reacting to injuries that can result in litigation, boards should ensure that administrators are implementing build-

ing-level playground policies designed to protect them.

Playground policies effectively create the blueprint to prevent injuries to students and limit district liability. Policies should include the number of recess periods per grade level, the amount of time for recess at each level, student/teacher ratios, supervision expectations, maintenance plans, and emergency protocols.

These plans help clarify goals and encourage collective ownership of the responsibilities and procedures at the building level. Finally, playground policies must be routinely evaluated to determine their effectiveness, adequacy, and efficiency.

Pay attention to the nuts and bolts

The third recommendation is to prioritize playground maintenance inspections. Maintenance is important in the prevention of injury, yet our survey indicates that more than a quarter of schools do not routinely inspect the playground, and only half of schools use a playground maintenance checklist.

The lack of routine maintenance and documentation in a play area can void the manufacturer's warranty, put children in physical danger, and waste dollars on unusable equipment, not to mention exposing the district to litigation related to student injury.

In addition, just as elementary students would not be expected to use desks and furniture from the high school, the playground should be suitable for the ages served. Outdoor environment should not be a one-size-fits-all proposition but must accommodate different ages and developmental ability levels.

School districts should consider designating specific play areas for different grades. Our study found that 45 percent of schools allowed preschool children to use the same equipment as the school-age children. While this arrangement may be convenient for the building schedule, it is not compliant with CPSC recommendations.

CPSC suggests playground equipment be separate for preschool- and school-age children. Furthermore, if a preschool child received a severe injury resulting from using equipment designed for much larger, stronger, more developed children, the school is exposing itself to an unnecessary risk of litigation.

Playground staff

The fourth recommendation is to implement appropriate training for supervisors. School safety drills and training of all sorts are now as routine as paper and pencils, yet our study revealed that only 15 percent of responding schools provide training for playground supervisors.

Not only does the playground itself need to be safe, but adults need to become active supervisors. The mere presence of an adult does not guarantee quality supervision, any

more than the mere presence of a teacher ensures high-quality classroom instruction.

Those responsible for playground supervision need adequate, appropriate training aimed at preventing injuries and maximizing the benefits of recess. Our study found teachers and teacher associates were responsible 90 percent of the time for supervision responsibilities yet, as noted above, very few districts provide training in this area.

While many board members and administrators can attest to the increasing mandates and regulations, surprisingly no federal or state mandates relating to playground supervision ratios exist. This may explain why one school reported having only one playground supervisor for 121 students during recess. The most common supervisor-to-student ratio was 1-to-50.

Additionally, the assumption that the mere presence of a supervisor equates to effective supervision can lead to serious liability for schools. Therefore, effective training should include identifying appropriate ratios, establishing safe behavior expectations, and recognizing procedures for reporting and addressing maintenance problems. The National Program for Playground Safety offers a wide selection of online training opportunities and resources for school districts.

Build favorite memories

We know that children learn through play. Unfortunately, recess is often an overlooked and misunderstood topic within school districts. Recess is not the enemy of student learning. Rather, it is an important source of support for learning, enjoyment, and healthy development.

Districts that discount recess' impact and connection to student achievement do so at their own peril. Efforts to slash recess time in a well-intentioned effort to increase student achievement may actually be undercutting those efforts. Our study reveals a growing need for greater attention to playground issues.

In the current climate of increasing expectations and growing demands for the use of data in decision-making, school boards and administrators should leverage the existing research related to playgrounds in such a way that supports safe outdoor environments, effective supervision, and maintenance procedures. They should resist ill-conceived plans to reduce, ignore, or eliminate attention paid to a vital part of student learning and development. Wise boards and administrators see the connections among recess, student safety, and student achievement. ■

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