

Survey Regarding Recess Periods for Elementary School Students

Report to the Legislature

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Survey Regarding Recess Periods for Elementary School Students

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	iii
I. Introduction	1
II. Process	1
III. Findings	2
IV. Conclusion and Areas for Future Study	8
V. Appendices	8
Appendix A: List of Respondent Cities	9
Appendix B: Recess Survey	10

Executive Summary

“I have 4 children, 3 of whom are still elementary age. As a Mom, I know how important it is for them to get their energy out. I am already discouraged that our school does not have an afternoon recess. When I was a student, we had three recess times: a.m., lunch, and p.m. They were vital to our development and growth as children. Recess is not just a time to play, but it is an opportunity and an exercise in social development, large motor skill development, and conflict resolution. I include the latter because I am also a playground supervisor (aka: mediator). These are extremely important and help to develop and mature children into productive adults.”

Suzu Orth, Spokane parent and playground monitor, January 2008.

For the past several years, some parents and legislators have raised concerns about a possible trend toward reducing and/or eliminating recess periods. The question was posed as to whether the stories were isolated cases or part of a larger statewide trend. To help answer this question, the 2009 Legislature directed the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to collaborate with the Washington State Parent Teacher Association (WSPTA) to gather a statewide picture of recess activities.

Traditionally, recess has been part of the school day. The number of minutes for each recess and the number of recesses provided has been up to local schools and districts, and as such, varies widely. To date, data on recess practices has not been collected systematically at the state level. This survey is an attempt by OSPI and the WSPTA to deepen our understanding of statewide recess practices and trends at the elementary level, in order to inform future discussions, which may involve policy considerations.

Survey Participation

The survey was emailed to the principals of the 1190 schools that have elementary grade levels. A total of 607 responses were received, which is a response rate of approximately 50 percent. To encourage accurate reporting, we did not ask for the name of the school or the district; however, we were able to identify the name of the city where the survey was filled out. This list, which is included in Appendix A, indicates that we had participation from a wide variety of schools and districts across the state. School principals received the survey link and controlled who completed the survey. It is possible that a school submitted more than one survey.

Issues Identified by Survey Respondents

- Some amount of recess time is recognized as an important component of the school day.
- There is a trend over the past five years towards decreasing rather than increasing the number of recess minutes, though the majority of schools that participated in the survey have not reduced recess.
- Exclusion from recess time is a widespread practice for both academic and behavioral reasons.
- Currently recess is largely defined by teacher contracts, not student needs.
- Very few schools are aware of the existence of recess policies, with schools in Tacoma being the notable exception.
- Adequate staffing/supervision for recess periods are of concern.
- Half of all schools do not have adequate facilities for recess during inclement weather.

No specific recommendations were included in this report, as the purpose of this survey is to inform follow-up discussions amongst legislators and stakeholders.

I. Introduction

During the 2009 legislative session, the Legislature passed Substitute Senate Bill (SSB) 5551, which directed the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Washington State Parent Teacher Association (WSPTA) to collaborate on a statewide survey to develop a richer understanding of recess practices and perceptions around the value of recess in Washington's public elementary schools.

Currently 16 percent of our nation's children are overweight. This is a result of poor nutritional habits and a lack of physical activity. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, "Childhood weight problems can lead to complications such as elevated blood pressure and cholesterol, joint problems, type 2 diabetes, gallbladder disease, asthma, depression and anxiety." Daily physical activity is an important part of the solution to these health issues. Participation in regularly scheduled recess can contribute to overall child health.

Questions from the Legislation

The 2009 legislation, SSB 5551, specified that the survey must address the following questions:

- How much time does the elementary school devote for recess each day?
- Whether the amount of time devoted to recess has decreased or increased, and why?
- Is recess a structured or unstructured activity at the school?
- If recess is part of the scheduled day, may an individual teacher keep a student from participating in recess for academic or discipline reasons?
- How is recess provided during inclement weather?
- Do you believe that recess is a necessary part of the school day?

As the survey team developed the questions, those cited above were addressed, then others were added in order to clarify recess perceptions and practices in our state. Particular interest was focused in learning about whether or not districts had written policies regarding recess. We also wanted to hear about what they saw as the potential benefits and challenges to providing recess. Finally, questions were included about whether or not schools had adequate facilities for the provision of recess during inclement weather.

II. Process

Survey Team

The survey design team consisted of staff from both the WSPTA and OSPI, two parents chosen by the WSPTA, and a representative from the Washington Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity (WCPPA). The team met one time in July 2009, and completed the work via email.

Survey Release

The survey was emailed to principals of all Washington State elementary schools on October 1, 2009, and two follow-up reminders were also sent. Principals were given the option to complete the survey individually or assign the survey to another staff member. The survey closed on October 16, 2009. (The survey is included in Appendix B.)

III. Findings

Survey Participation

The survey was emailed to the principals of the 1190 schools that have elementary grade levels. A total of 607 responses were received, which is a response rate of approximately 50 percent. To encourage accurate reporting, we did not ask for the name of the school or the district; however, we were able to identify the name of the city where the survey was filled out. This list, which is included in Appendix A, indicates that we had participation from a wide variety of schools and districts across the state. School principals received the survey link and controlled who completed the survey. It is possible that a school submitted more than one survey.

Characteristics of responding schools

Schools that responded were predominantly of small to mid-size. Responses were fairly evenly distributed from schools with 101–450 students (49.3%) and 451–750 students (42.3%). Only five percent responded that they were very small (1–100 students), and 3.2 percent were very large (750 or more students).

Large numbers of responses were received from all major metropolitan areas in both eastern and western Washington. We also received responses from many small towns. Ten respondents indicated that their schools were K–12; these schools are typically in very small and rural communities.

Of note, we received the 95 responses from Tacoma addresses. This survey did not ask the respondents to identify their districts, but we were able to identify the city where the online survey was completed. There are only 37 elementary schools in Tacoma Public Schools. The additional responses may have come from schools served by neighboring districts with Tacoma addresses.

It is significant that so many responses came from the Tacoma area because recess was the subject of intense debate a few years ago in Tacoma Public Schools. Initially, the district allowed recess to be significantly cut back. After advocacy efforts led by parents, the district adopted a recess policy that mandated one recess in addition to the lunch recess. (The Tacoma policy is included in the “Recess Policies” section of this report.) It is possible that there was greater interest in this survey from the Tacoma area, due to their recent experiences in dealing with this topic.

How much recess time?

Do all kids have at least one daily recess?

The answer appears to be “almost all.” Ninety-eight percent indicated that they provide at least one daily recess for their children. Only nine respondents said that their schedule does not include a recess every day.

Number of recess periods

Half of the respondents answered that they provide two recess periods, while 21 percent answered that they provide three. Only nine percent said that they only provide one recess. Twenty percent answered “other” to this question. The typical explanation that this group gave was that they provide more recess periods for younger children (except half-day kindergarten, which typically has one recess), and then fewer for older children.

Almost all schools (94%) offer unstructured outdoor playtime for recess. One third of schools offer opportunities for supervised activities, which can include outside games, clubs, library time, and/or craft groups, etc. Only three percent indicated that they have any type of required structured activity. Of this group, one commented that the required activity consisted of doing a lap around the track before free play.

Average minutes per day

Nearly half responded that they provide 30–45 minutes of recess per day. Almost one third responded that they provide 16–30 minutes per day. Approximately ten percent of respondents provide less than this, and 12 percent provide more than 45 minutes. We also asked about the length of the longest recess. Just over half answered that their longest recess was from 11–20 minutes, with 45 percent responding that their longest recess was 21–30 minutes. There were a few outliers at both ends of the spectrum.

One recess is connected with lunch

Ninety-eight percent reported that they connect a recess period with a lunch period. Thirty-eight percent indicated that they provide a recess after lunch; while 89.9 percent indicated that they provide recess before lunch. Based on the answers, which add up to more than 100 percent, and the comments, some schools are scheduling recess so that some students have it before lunch, while others have it after lunch. Recent research by Bergman¹, that is widely quoted, supports the value of providing recess after lunch.

¹ Bergman, E.A., et al, “Relationship of Meal and Recess Schedule to Plate Waste in Elementary Schools.” National Food Service Management Institute. Insight. Spring, 2004.

Is recess being reduced?

Sixty percent of schools reported that they have not reduced recess time over the past five years; while 30 percent said that they have made reductions. A somewhat surprising finding was that nine percent reported that they have increased recess time. The overall trend appears to be towards decreasing recess time, though it is important to note that the majority have not made reductions. When asked to specifically indicate the reasons for changing the amount of time devoted to recess, the need to increase academic time ranked at the top, with supervision or staffing issues coming in second.

From the comments, we learned that staffing issues can contribute to a decline or an increase in the number of recess minutes. For example, some districts have increased the number of recess minutes to give teachers an additional break or planning time. Others noted that they have decreased the number of minutes due to insufficient staff to supervise recess.

What are the challenges to providing recess?

When specifically asked about a list of potential challenges to providing recess, over 80 percent chose supervision/staffing as an issue. Academic time ranked second with 55 percent. Forty-three percent agreed that behavioral concerns were an issue, and one third noted that facilities were a concern. Only eight percent marked that there were other concerns, indicating that the choices listed accurately reflected their concerns. Many of the comments referred to an increase in behavioral issues during unstructured recess periods, especially if there is inadequate supervision.

Most teachers are allowed to provide additional unscheduled recess

To find out whether or not teachers have flexibility in providing breaks to their classes, we asked if teachers can choose to provide unscheduled recess periods. Eighty percent responded that they are allowed to do this.

Exclusion Practices

When asked about whether or not teachers can exclude students from recess, almost all (93%) answered that teachers are allowed to make these decisions. Only seven percent indicated that exclusion from recess is discouraged schoolwide. Many chose to add comments about this issue. Often they noted that there was recognition of the value of recess, so that children would not be excluded from every recess but may be excluded from one recess. Both academic and behavioral reasons were given for excluding children from recess. It was also noted many times that children may be excluded from one or more recesses if their behavior creates a safety concern. Several mentioned having a special “opportunity room” for children to go to during recess to complete homework or for behavioral reasons. Exclusion from recess appears to be a widely accepted and common practice for both academic and behavioral reasons.

Recess during inclement weather

To get at this issue, we asked a two-part question. First, we asked whether or not schools have appropriate facilities for recess during inclement weather. Just over 50 percent replied that they did not have adequate facilities, while just below 50 percent replied that “yes” their facilities were adequate. In the comments a very small number indicated that they send the students outside no matter what the weather is like; facilities were not an issue for them.

Many children stay in the classrooms

If they answered “no” to the facilities question, we asked them to describe how they handle weather challenges, which in Washington can often include rain, wind, snow and/or extremely cold weather. We received 274 comments regarding this topic; more than on any other question. The vast majority of respondents said that children are kept in the classrooms where they can play board games or other “quiet” activities such as drawing or watching movies. Often they mentioned that paraprofessionals would supervise these activities.

Teachers were sometimes mentioned as providing supervision, though less often. Many times the provision of adequate supervision was cited as a challenge, with supervisors “roaming” from one room to the next. In some cases the gym is used, but it was often noted that this was subject to the schedule. Other rooms such as the library, the computer lab, and hallways were also mentioned as places that children sometimes can use, but these were not frequently cited. The classroom was clearly the area that was most frequently used.

Existing facilities inadequate to meet needs

Many respondents mentioned that they did have covered outside play spaces, but that this space was not adequate to accommodate the needs. It was also noted that the smaller spaces lead to more behavioral issues. Many noted that kids had the option of the covered play area or the indoor activities.

The overall impression left by those who said that they did not have adequate facilities, was that they were not satisfied with their options during inclement weather. Below is a quote from one of the respondents which exemplifies the feelings of those who responded:

“We are forced to have recess in classrooms where students play quiet games. Teachers can quickly run to the restroom or grab a cup of coffee while para eds. walk the hallways. Not the best solution, but all that we can manage. We used to have particular grade levels, on particular days, be able to access the gym and/or community room, but since these areas must now be used for overloaded classes, that is no longer an option.”

Recess Policies

When asked about the existence of recess policies, 81 percent of those who answered said that they did not know of any policies. A larger number of respondents than was typical for this survey, chose to skip this particular question altogether (23%), suggesting that they did not know how to answer it.

As part of this question, we asked respondents who have policies to include the policy in the comment section. Many respondents commented that they were not aware of policies requiring recess, but that recess was a part of the contractual agreement with the teachers. Examples given were that teachers contract for this time for bathroom breaks, planning time, and duty-free lunch. The message conveyed was that because teachers are required to have these breaks, students get them as well.

The notable exception to this type of reply came from Tacoma. Several respondents from Tacoma included their recess policy, which was adopted in September 2008. One other more basic recess policy was cited by two respondents. Both of these are listed below.

Tacoma Recess Policy No. 2146

The Board of Directors believes that it is good educational practice to enable a daily break period for elementary-age children. Evidence has shown that such a break period contributes significantly to the educational, health and social development of children. A break from the daily routine contributes to alertness in people of all ages, particularly young children. Providing respite is highly compatible with brain research and attention span in children. Analysis of research findings also consistently concludes that physical activity supports learning.

School recess activities also develop social skills and social interactions of children. It is recognized that children in today's world are engaging in more solitary activities with electronic devices and games. Organized sports may provide teaming opportunities for some, but fewer chances exist in open settings and less-structured social interactions. Recess contributes to activities that can help develop skills in conflict resolution, leadership, social interaction, and group play.

Evidence is clear that our children face increasing health risks. Childhood obesity is increasing as a major threat to our children. Inactivity is contributory to obesity, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. While there is no guarantee that all children will be active during recess periods, data reflects that elementary children engage in vigorous physical activity during recess—perhaps exceeding physical education classes.

Therefore, it shall be the policy of Board of Directors that every elementary child will, to every extent appropriate, have a daily opportunity for recess in addition to the daily lunch/recess period.

The superintendent is directed to develop guidelines for the implementation of this policy. Such recess shall be supervised but shall largely consist of unstructured play time. Scheduling shall be conducted at the school and classroom level. Withholding of physical education class, recess, and/or other forms of physical activity as punishment or in lieu of completing other academic work is discouraged. Occasional loss of recess may occur, but repeated loss over time is not acceptable.

Recess policy from an anonymous district

In addition to required physical education, students at the elementary level should have the opportunity to participate in daily recess and physical activity. The district shall provide daily recess period(s) for elementary school students, featuring time for unstructured but supervised active play. The district will promote the use of school facilities for physical activity programs offered by the school and/or community-based organizations outside of school hours.

Benefits of Recess

To assess this question we provided a list of four of the potential benefits, followed by a comment option. The four that we specifically addressed and the responses are shown in the table below.

Answer Options	Response Percentage
Recess improves classroom behavior.	72%
Recess improves academic performance.	68%
Recess contributes to the overall health of students.	88%
Recess provides a break for classroom teachers.	71%

Most respondents agreed that there are a wide variety of positive benefits to recess. In the comment section, respondents expanded on these concepts. They noted the need to have a break, burn off energy, to exercise, to interact socially, use their imaginations, problem solve, explore, and get fresh air.

Several tempered their discussion of the benefits by noting their concerns about negative behaviors that occur during recess, which can also have a spillover effect during other parts of the day. Issues that occurred on the playground may still need to be addressed as children reenter the classroom or are sent to the office.

Is Recess Important?

In answer to this question, the vast majority (88%) agreed/strongly agreed that recess is important. However, the comments for this question tell a more complex story. Many did continue to extol the benefits of recess in the comment section. Others noted that

there is such a thing as too much recess, especially if there is not enough skilled supervision to handle the behavioral issues that arise with unstructured play. Insufficient funding was cited as a barrier to recess. Some also brought up the need to fit in more time for academics. Several wrote that one recess per day was sufficient. Also, several noted that they did not feel that recess should be protected more than other parts of the day. There really does not appear to be general consensus about the amount of recess and how people feel about recess. This may very well be related to issues such as the ability to provide a quality experience during recess and how successful the children are at achieving academic goals.

IV. Conclusion and Areas for Future Study

The purpose of this report was to inform future policy discussions. The findings indicate that not just one, but multiple factors impact the provision of recess to elementary students. Policy recommendations could be developed by legislators and stakeholders to address the concerns raised by this report.

A more in-depth analysis could be done using the data that has already been collected in this survey. Given the limited amount of resources available to do this report, there was no attempt made to look for correlations between the answers to any of the questions. For example, is there a correlation between the number of minutes of recess that a school offers and whether or not the school has adequate facilities for recess?

Additional questions would require data that was not collected in this survey. Based on some of the comments, other areas of interest include correlations between the level of funding that a school receives, the poverty level and/or the test scores of a school, and the number of minutes provided for recess.

V. Appendices

Appendix A: List of Cities

Appendix B: Recess Survey

Appendix A

List of Respondent Cities

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aberdeen (2) • Auburn (8) • Bainbridge Island • Bellevue • Bellingham (23) • Bothell (18) • Bremerton (8) • Buckley (3) • Burlington • Camano Island (3) • Carson • Cathlamet • Chehalis (4) • Chesterfield • Clarkston • Darrington • Dayton • Easton • Edmonds (5) • Ellensburg • Enumclaw (2) • Ephrata (2) • Everett (35) • Federal Way (7) • Gig Harbor (5) • Goldendale • Graham (9) • Grandview (3) • Harrington (2) • Hayden • Hoquiam • Issaquah (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kelso (3) • Kenmore (6) • Kennewick (44) • Kent (8) • Kirkland (2) • Lake Stevens (7) • Lakewood (4) • Liberty Lake • Lind • Long Beach • Longview • Lynnwood (7) • Maple Valley (2) • Marysville (2) • Medical Lake • Montesano (2) • Moses Lake (2) • Mt. Vernon (3) • Nak Nek • Oak Harbor (5) • Olympia (27) • Othello (2) • Pasco (12) • Pomeroy • Prosser (5) • Puyallup (9) • Quilcene (4) • Rainier • Redmond (4) • Renton (5) • Ritzville • Rochester (5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seattle (65) • Shelton • Sheridan • Silverdale • Snohomish (4) • Spanaway (2) • Spokane (30) • Stanwood (3) • Stevenson • Sumner • Sunnyside (6) • Tacoma (97) • Toledo • Toppenish • Union • Vancouver (15) • Vashon • Wapato • Washougal • Wenatchee (10) • Woodinville • Woodland • Yakima (14) • Yelm (3)
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A total of 607 responses were received. The number of responses is indicated in parentheses following the city when more than one response was received.

Recess Survey

1. Introduction

In the 2009 legislative session, the legislature passed SSB 5551 asking the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Washington State PTA to collaborate on a statewide survey to develop a richer understanding about recess practices and perceptions around the value of recess in Washington's public elementary schools. OSPI and Washington State PTA will submit the results of this survey in a report due to the legislature by December 1, 2009, in order to inform legislative deliberations on this topic during the 2010 session.

Please consult with and/or assign survey completion to appropriate school personnel. This survey is estimated to take 15-20 minutes to complete. Participation in this survey is voluntary and survey respondents are encouraged, but not required, to answer all of the questions. Your input is critical and valued, and we hope to receive a large response rate.

The deadline for the survey is October 16. A prompt response would be greatly appreciated!

Recess Survey

2. School Demographics

1. Please select the configuration that best characterizes your school:

K-5

K-6

K-3

4-6

Other (please specify)

2. How many students (FTE's) attend your school?

1-100

101-450

451-750

Over 750

Recess Survey

3. Recess at Your School

1. Recess at our school includes:
(You may check more than one.)

- Unstructured outdoor playtime;
- Opportunities for supervised activities outside of the classroom; (Students may choose a structured activity such as running clubs, library time, craft groups, etc.)
- Required structured activity;
- Recess is incorporated with Physical Education classes;
- No recess is offered.
- Other (please specify)

2. Does your school building and/or district have a policy granting recess? If yes, please copy and paste the section of the policy that pertains to recess into the comment box.

Yes

No

Other (please specify)

* 3. Does your school schedule currently include daily recess?

Yes

No

Recess Survey

4. Recess at Your School (continued)

1. How many recesses are scheduled per day? Please describe alternative schedules in the "other" box.

1

2

3

Other (please specify)

2. On average, how many minutes do students spend each day at scheduled recess?

1-15

16-30

30-45 minutes

More than 45 minutes

3. Is one of your recesses connected to lunch?

Yes

No

4. What does your lunch recess schedule look like? (You may check both if both apply.)

Recess is before lunch

Recess is after lunch

5. How long is your school's longest recess?

1-10 minutes

11-20 minutes

21-30 minutes

More than 30 minutes

Recess Survey

6. Does the amount of time scheduled for recess change based on grade level? If the answer is yes, please describe the change(s) in the comment box.

Yes

No

Comments

Recess Survey

5. Recess at Your School (continued)

1. Has the amount of time devoted to recess changed over the last five years?

Increased

Decreased

No change

Comments

2. If the amount of time devoted to recess has changed, please indicate the average number of minutes per day of the change. (We are looking for the amount of change, not the total minutes of recess.)

1-10 minutes

11-20 minutes

30-45 minutes

More than 45 minutes

Not applicable, no change

3. Below is a list of possible reasons for increasing or decreasing scheduled recess minutes. If you have made changes, please mark those that influenced your decision.

No Child Left Behind/To Increase Academic Time

Facilities

Supervision/Staffing

New Policy

New Leadership

Behavioral Concerns

Not Applicable, no change

Other (please specify)

Recess Survey

4. Do teachers have the opportunity to provide unscheduled recess during the school day?

Yes

No

5. Does your school have appropriate facilities for recess during inclement weather? If the answer is no, then please describe how your school handles recess during inclement weather in the "comments" box.

Yes

No

Comments

Recess Survey

6. Attitudes About Recess

1. What do you see as potential benefits of recess?

- Recess improves classroom behavior.
- Recess improves academic performance.
- Recess contributes to the overall health of students.
- Recess provides a break for classroom teachers.
- Other (please specify)

2. What are potential challenges related to providing recess?

- No Child Left Behind/Academic time
- Facilities
- Supervision/staffing
- Behavioral Concerns
- Other (please specify)

3. Is your staff allowed to exclude students from all or part of recess as a consequence for academic or discipline reasons?

- No, not allowed
- Exclusion is discouraged schoolwide
- Teachers have discretion as to how they handle exclusions
- Yes

Comments

Recess Survey

4. Please rate the following statement:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Recess is an important part of the school day.	ja	ja	ja	ja	ja

Comments

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