

Recess backlash: Parents say it pays to play

By Kris Axtman | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor



The American playground is now also a battleground for parents, educators, and policymakers – with many struggling to defend the tradition of recess against the incursion of tight budgets.

As far back as 1999, some 40 percent of sampled school districts nationwide had eliminated or cut back recess. But since then a backlash has begun to preserve a place for childhood energies to be unleashed during the schoolday.

Virginia mandated daily recess, then Michigan, and now Connecticut, Georgia, and Washington, D.C., are considering the move. And across the country, incredulous parents are trying to take back recess one school at a time.

"Administrators are saying they don't have time in the day for recess," says Rebecca Lamphere, now with the National Recess Support Network. But she says learning more is not just a function of studying more. Children "need a break. Fresh minds foster education."

It sounds like advice your grandmother would give you, but as school administrators feel pinched for test prep time and pressured to do more with less, schools are squeezed. As a result, children

may get recess only twice a week, during physical education classes, or not at all, depending on the school.

The loss of recess, according to experts in child health and psychology, results in a more sedentary, stressed-out youngster who may have a harder time learning to socialize. Like the loss of PE, art, and music – it's also a blow to the "whole child" approach to education – which says that playing is as important to learning as the multiplication tables are to math.

"Frustrated parents are watching their children come home much less happy and much more fidgety," says Rhonda Clements, an education professor at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., and president of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play.

She says she receives 30 to 50 e-mails a day from distraught parents – a number that has grown steadily since the early 1990s.

How one mom fought back

Laurie Walmsley is one of those moms fighting the recess issue on a local level.

She says she didn't know anything was amiss in the suburban schools north of Dallas until her fourth-grade son, Brett, began having a tough year. He didn't want to go to school, saying he "hated it" – and his grades were proof. She finally asked him what would make him happy again and want to go to school. "Recess," he answered simply. "We don't get recess anymore."

"I could not believe it," she says. "I thought, 'Everybody needs a break.' "

After unsuccessfully discussing the issue with the principal, she went to the Princeton School Board and made a fuss. Board members agreed that children should have recess and wrote a resolution that called for a daily 15-minute break from kindergarten to sixth grade. But it wasn't a mandate, and Brett's teacher routinely overlooked it.

Brett, now 11, says recess definitely made a difference – when he got it. "I would play on the jungle gym or swing or talk to my friends. And when I went back to class, I concentrated better."

After more than a year of fighting for recess, Walmsley pulled her two children from the public schools and began home schooling them. Now Brett is getting good grades, has fun learning, and gets breaks – "We go to our rooms and hold our rats and run around the house and stuff."

A growing body of research finds that even a 15- or 20-minute break enhances a child's ability to learn. In addition to being able to relax and release pent-up energy, recess teaches children how to play with one another, how to iron out differences, and how to use new words.

"Recess isn't just about play," says Susan Ohanian, the author of "What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?" She says she felt compelled to write the book when Atlanta made front-page headlines by building an elementary school with no playground.

Many school districts say it is this new emphasis on high-stakes testing that is to blame for dwindling recess time. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 focuses on cognitive development, literacy, and numeracy. All children should learn to read by third grade, for instance.

"We all want that," says Edward Zigler, a psychologist and director of Yale's Center in Child Development and Social Policy. But "play develops all types of skills that are important to the reading process.... I blame the people in Washington who want to define children by their test scores."

Dr. Zigler is not surprised, however, by the government's renewed emphasis on cognitive learning. He remembers the same attitude when the Soviet Union beat the US into space with Sputnik in 1957.

Causes go beyond budgets, tests

But it would be too simplistic to blame the recess cutbacks entirely on standardized testing, some experts say.

More and more teachers are refusing to supervise children on the playground.

Some parents insist that they don't want their children exposed to the dangers outside. Principals worry about the threat of lawsuits if accidents should happen. School budgets keep being cut.

"It's a complex problem," says Barbara Bowman, an education professor at the Erikson Institute in Chicago.

She blames parents, in part, for allowing children to sit in front of the television instead of forcing them outside to play with others.

That's why it is all the more important to offer recess during school time, says Dr. Clements. "Children need to learn to socialize somewhere," she says. "And right now, there is a very narrow-minded group of children who only know how to play with computer games."