



Focus Groups Identify Barriers to Recess Placement Prior to Lunch in Elementary Schools

OVERVIEW

Using focus group research methodology, the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) Applied Research Division conducted a study to determine barriers to scheduling recess prior to lunch in schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). After conducting pilot focus groups in a Midwest district, focus group meetings were held with homogenous groups of school administrators, school nutrition personnel, teachers, and parents from three school districts. The school districts were selected based on United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) region (Mountain Plains, Southeast, Northeast) and current recess placement after lunch in the elementary schools. Foodservice directors in these regions were contacted via phone and electronic mail to determine current recess placement and willingness to host the focus groups in their

districts. Focus group participants were invited by the researcher and/or the school personnel in the districts. There were four focus groups (one with each group) held on the same day in each participating district with 21-26 participants representing each district, for a total of twelve group meetings for the study.

Each focus group meeting was tape-recorded and transcribed to capture a complete and accurate record of the discussion available. The strength of this study approach was the diverse group of school personnel and parents who shared their experiences in an open-ended discussion format.

Participants shared a variety of barriers to the placement of recess prior to lunch. The barriers most frequently mentioned by administrators included: a) preservation of morning hours for academics, b) logistical concerns of supervision, hand washing, and cold weather clothing, c) possible resistance by faculty, staff, and parents, and d) tradition. The barriers most frequently mentioned by school nutrition personnel included: a) supervision, b) movement of children on and off the playground, c)

scheduling, and d) winter clothing. The barriers most frequently mentioned by teachers were: a) logistics, b) academic priorities, c) willingness of administrators, d) exercise, e) weather, f) scheduling blocks, and g) tradition. The barriers most frequently mentioned by parents were: a) logistics such as scheduling, staffing, and space b) winter clothing, c) nutrition beliefs, d) previous experiences with a family member, e) tradition, f) behavior, and g) communication.

OBJECTIVES

The benefits of school meals to children include improved nutrition, health and well-being, promotion of growth and development, protection against diseases and chronic health conditions, and development of good eating habits (Buzby & Guthrie, 2002). However, a review of plate waste in school nutrition programs conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (Buzby & Guthrie, 2002) found that in addition to the direct cost of food, plate waste may reduce the nutritional benefits that children receive from the NSLP. An environmental factor that affects consumption and food waste in the NSLP is the placement of recess in relation to the lunch period.

Studies show children who have recess placement prior to lunch instead of after lunch consume significantly more food and nutrients and waste less food (Bergman, Buerger, Femrite & Englund, 2003; Getlinger, Laughlin, Bell, Akre, & Arjmandi, 1996). Yet, according to the School Health Policies and Programs Study, only 4.6% of elementary schools schedule recess prior to lunch



(Wechsler, Brenner, Kuester, & Miller, 2001). Therefore, based in part on this evidence, it is important to investigate the barriers to recess placement prior to lunch.

METHODS

Using focus group research, the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) Applied Research Division conducted a study to determine barriers to scheduling recess prior to lunch in schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The Eastern Michigan University and The Ohio State University Human Subjects Committees approved the study and focus group questions.

Four groups participated in focus group meetings; the groups included school administrators, school nutrition personnel, teachers, and parents. Data were collected in a systematic approach by asking semi-structured, open-ended questions. Each question in the focus group meeting had a specific function in the focus group research process.

Focus Group Meetings

School districts were selected based on U.S. Department of Agriculture region (Midwest, Mountain Plains, Southeast, Northeast) and current recess placement after lunch in the elementary schools.

After four pilot focus group meetings with school administrators, school nutrition personnel, teachers, and

completed. The researchers refined and finalized a series of questions designed to explore the barriers to recess placement before lunch in elementary schools.

The same individual moderated all of the focus group meetings. The assistant moderator/recorder compiled notes. Throughout the focus group sessions, the moderator used a structured approach to keep the discussion focused on the selected topics. Each focus group session was tape-recorded and transcribed so that a complete record of the discussion was available for analysis.

Data Analysis

The pilot focus group transcripts were not included in the analysis. Independently, the researchers also conducted a systematic, question-by-question analysis of the transcripts to ensure that the themes of the meetings were correctly assigned. Then, comments for each question were thematically categorized into 13 prevailing themes and summarized by type of participant.

FINDINGS

Comparing the summarized comments from each session revealed a series of thirteen issues that occurred throughout all focus group discussions. The comments from school administrators, teachers, and school nutrition participants focused on district-wide and school-wide issues, however the comments from parents were more likely to be school-specific and child-specific rather than across schools.

The following is a summary of the issues with type of participant identified. School administrators were principals, assistant principals, superintendents, and district health administrators. School nutrition participants included food and nutrition directors and supervisors, managers, nutrition assistants, and lunch supervisors. The quotations of representative comments are italicized.

Better Nutrition and Less Food Waste

School Administrator *"We know other schools that have tried it (recess prior to lunch) have testimonials that the nutrition intake is improved, and that they make better choices and eat more thoroughly when they are not rushed to get outside to play."*

School Nutrition Participant *"I think recess before lunch would be a good idea. We see kids come in to lunch from sitting in the classroom, but what they really want to do is go out to play. They go through the line, dump their trays, and raise their hands to go outside. They don't eat because they want to go outside to play. But if they had recess first, when they come in, their appetite is increased. They come in and they want to eat more."*

Teacher *"I can see where they would eat more. Now they just want to get out to recess. That's a big thing. I can see where they would eat more and they would probably eat slower knowing they have to go back to class..."*

Teacher *"I know there must be statistics on the amount of food that is wasted. It must be tremendous. Part of it is they may not have the appetite or they just want to go out and play. Whereas if it were reversed, they may work up an appetite, and there is not that urgency to get to class like there is to get to recess. That would probably carry some weight."*

Focus Group Meeting Questions

- Please tell us your name and the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word "recess."
- How do you feel about recess before lunch?
- Are you aware of the research that shows children eat better, waste less food, and behave better with recess scheduled prior to lunch? Can you share your thoughts about this?
- What is the greatest barrier to having recess prior to lunch?
- What is the greatest barrier to scheduling recess prior to lunch?
- What would it take for you to change your schedule to recess prior to lunch? (administrators only)
- Are there specific issues that affect (teachers, school nutrition personnel, parents only) regarding recess before lunch?
- How could administrators be convinced to schedule recess prior to lunch?
- Is there anything we should have talked about, but didn't?
- Of all the topics we discussed, which one is the most important to you?

parents from elementary schools in Michigan, focus group meetings were held in Colorado, Maine, and Kentucky in spring, 2005. There were 21 to 26 participants in each school district.

Following the pilot focus group meetings, a review of the focus group questions and focus group plan was

Teacher *"The most important thing is, 'What is better for the child?' We have a low socioeconomic area and in my school we have a large population of free and reduced lunch participants. If we know they are getting one wonderful meal and they are eating, to me whatever is in the best interest of the child (their behavior improves, they are eating better and more healthy foods) is the priority, not scheduling and everything else that comes, even the politics of a school. The child's needs must come first. If it is proven to be better in a large sample of schools or kids, then it is definitely worth pursuing."*

Behavioral Issues Associated with Recess and Lunch

School Administrator *"What they get now is the flip side, and all of the problems on the playground (fighting, who did this and that) come in with them."*

School Administrator *"It is very inviting to think about kids behaving better in the cafeteria because that is a problem."*

Teacher *"It might be a good idea to try it with a couple of classes to begin with, to gradually implement it to get results. Better behavior would be a selling point."*

Parent *"Each school community is different. The needs are all different. Whatever needs you have, if there are discipline problems or some obesity problems or what have you...If you think this program would be helpful, meet with your principal and discuss..."*

Parent *"Ability to re-focus, re-group, to get back on task with a full meal."*

Parent *"If they had recess first it wouldn't be as hard on the teacher to try to get them back...calm down and relax at lunch...that would be an advantage for a lot of kids."*

Parent *"They almost need recess toward the end of the day because they seem more physically active."*

Conflict Management

School Administrator *"Just thinking about the conflict management piece, has anyone tried a conflict management center in the cafeteria? One of the things that happens when they come in off the playground is they tell the teacher what happened on the playground. 'So and so took my ball' and the teachers are not sure what to do. We could have a conflict center in the cafeteria to work out the problems there."*

Teacher *"At our school we had recess before lunch and we alternated. We loved it because we weren't dealing with playground issues."*

Supervision Concerns

School Administrator *"As long as they are disciplined about getting the children in, then your cafeteria schedule will go according to schedule. If not, that could cause problems. That could be a barrier I would think. If the teachers aren't disciplined about getting the children into the building in time to take care of toiletry needs, then the class behind them is slowed down."*

School Administrator *"Also, supervision. If you have recess before lunch, you really need someone to take them into lunch. If you have recess before lunch, that is one less person out on the playground supervising kids."*

School Administrator *"...on the larger playgrounds you want to make sure that you have enough coverage for safety of the kids. To take one supervisor off is a concern."*

School Nutrition Participant *"Enough teachers on the playground. Supervision."*

School Nutrition Participant *"If they did that (staggered students entering the lunchroom from the playground), the children wouldn't like that because some would get a longer*

recess. We don't have enough people."

School Nutrition Participant *"We used to do it and they (the students) liked it. The problem was having enough people when we came in. I do agree that the children would like it. The children go from sitting in a classroom to sitting down at lunch. This way they can run, run, run for a half hour and then sit down."*

Teacher *"That was part of the reason it took so long. They also had to take off their coats and hang them up. That would be hard with a limited number of lunch aides."*

Parent *"I'm worried about who is going to watch the kids...who's going to be out on the playground with the children? There are not enough staff out there with the kids now."*

Preservation of Morning Hours for Academics

School Administrator *"I've always felt kids are more focused and responsive in the morning in the regular classroom. We need proven facts that they can learn as well in the afternoon, especially in reading and math areas."*

School Nutrition Participant *"The school curriculum because they have so much they have to pack in with the literacy."*

Teacher *"Well, we have a six hour school day with upwards of 425 students in recent years. Try to work different shifts in of different grade levels that are compatible within a time that is appropriate to be eating lunch, where you can take full advantage of the cafeteria staff, the lunch aides, the playground. Make it work well - utilize the people and the space. I think that has been more of a consideration, the order that it happens, to get*

BARRIERS MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED BY STUDY PARTICIPANTS:

School Administrators

- preservation of morning hours for academics
- logistical concerns of supervision, hand washing, and cold weather clothing
- possible resistance by faculty, staff, and parents
- tradition

School Nutrition Personnel

- supervision
- movement of children on and off playground
- scheduling
- cold weather clothing

Teachers

- logistics
- academic priorities
- willingness of administrators
- exercise
- weather
- scheduling blocks
- tradition

Parents

- logistics such as scheduling, staffing, and space
- cold weather clothing
- nutrition beliefs
- previous experiences with a family member
- tradition
- behavior
- communication

everybody fed in a window of time that is reasonable.”

Parent “I’m concerned about taking time away from the morning. Articles and things that I’ve read claim morning time is a critical time to learn, that students are more alert, especially the younger children...”

Tradition

School Administrator “This is really changing a practice that has gone on a long, long time. Our grandparents went to recess after lunch. So it truly is a paradigm shift. People will think that just because we’ve always done it this way, it is the right way. You’re messing with tradition. That’s a barrier.”

Teacher “I would say scheduling overall and I have to say tradition. I’m not sure we have looked at doing it. We can’t get all of ours (children) out there before their lunch. So scheduling would definitely be a problem, but I’m not sure that anybody has looked at advantages to having it, so that would just be tradition.”

Teacher “If the importance was focused on the child versus convenience of the schedule, “This is what is important for the child” versus “This is what is important for the school schedule,” that would help. That is an extremely difficult task, to convince administration to change something that has been done. The tradition is after lunch.”

Teacher “It’s so non-traditional, you don’t think of it. I would like to see this once. All three of these things (eat better, waste less food, and behave better.) Two of them are definitely very important to the child. Wasting less food would be better for the world and ecology. If it makes even a little bit of difference, it is worth looking at.”

Parent “It’s always been that way. Until I was invited to join this group, I had not thought about it.”

Timing of Lunch

Parent “At our school, they don’t have a breakfast program. They (the children) go to school without breakfast.”

Parent “If they were allowed a smart snack in the morning that would be good.”

Coats and Cold Weather Clothing Concerns

School Administrator “Do we have enough personnel to go into the classroom? It seems to me that getting them off the playground and the jackets...”

School Administrator “We need to look at the number of lunch aides, especially for the little kids. They could take off their jackets and hang them up before lunch. The students might not have as much time to play in the winter.”

School Nutrition Participant “The wet clothes in winter, jackets, snow pants, mittens... how do you keep everything together to go back to the classroom when they are done eating?”

School Nutrition Participant “In the winter, they are trying to juggle their clothes and they have their snowsuit on with mittens and hats. That is an issue whether you do it before or after if they don’t go to the classroom in between lunch and recess.”

Teacher “My concern would be in the winter months when they come in wet, sometimes soaked. They would have to take off their clothes before they

come in. How would that work? Are they expected to sit in their wet clothes?”

Parent “No chance to go to the classroom to hang up coats...”

Hand Washing Concerns

School Administrator “It’s hard to have enough supervision in our schools and to take somebody away to line the kids up, and take them inside for hand washing procedures. These are concerns that schools would have to work out regarding the logistics to make this happen.”

School Nutrition Participant “...how will they wash their hands before they eat?”

Teacher “They would have to stop someplace and wash their hands. They use the closest one (restroom) to the classroom...”

Teacher “I don’t know if they are washing their hands. They may not wash their hands regardless of which is first.”

Possible Resistance to Recess Prior to Lunch

School Administrator “Do you think there would be resistance from teachers? Changing the culture, another initiative, and the routine.”

School Administrator “Mine (teachers) are very willing.”

School Administrator “Instead of taking them (students) to the cafeteria you take them outside.”

School Administrator “The people to bring along are the lunch aides. So many of them are parents, too. They will make or break it. Lunch aides are key.”

Parent “Our administration is absolutely on board with doing whatever is necessary to be on top of issues that benefit the children... If it is shown that it is better for children.”

Most Important Topics for School Administrators

School Administrator “What is best for kids. What is best for kids? If it is better to do it the way you say, the way the research is going, then we should do it.”

School Administrator “Student learning.”

School Administrator “Readiness for learning.”

School Administrator “I can’t imagine that we won’t see a big difference. We will be setting the atmosphere during lunch. It is easier in the gym than outside.” (This comment is from a principal who was planning to schedule recess prior to lunch in the next school year.)

No Barriers for School Nutrition Personnel

School Nutrition Participant “Start lunch whenever you want. We are there. We’re ready.”

School Nutrition Participant “We are flexible. We can start lunch at any time.”

School Nutrition Participant “I don’t think it would affect us. If they did a test on it and let us go for a month, then we could tell you how it works.”

School Nutrition Participant “It doesn’t affect us.”

Convincing School Administrators

School Nutrition Participant “They need to know that if the kids eat properly and get the nutrition they need, they will learn better in the afternoon. Then, they (administration) will be more receptive. That’s a big thing.”

PRACTICAL USE OF THIS INFORMATION

The results of this study provide useful information on barriers likely to be encountered when advocating for the implementation and promotion of recess prior to lunch in elementary schools. However, participants predicted positive outcomes for recess prior to lunch including less food waste, better consumption of nutritious lunches, behavior improvement, and the potential to solve recess issues during lunch instead of during afternoon classes. School nutrition personnel did not foresee any barriers for having recess prior to lunch as relating to their job responsibilities.

The timing of lunch was an issue of concern for some focus group participants. Parents wondered if children who did not eat breakfast would be too hungry if lunch was moved to a later time. The school district in Maine had morning snacks that were brought to school by each student. The timing of the snack was a concern because in some schools it was too close to the time of lunch. If morning snacks are part of a plan, then the timing of the snacks should not be too close to the lunch time.

Participants provided rich discussion relating to convincing school administrators on recess placement, important topics to consider, and resources for implementing recess prior to lunch. The following provides an overview of the discussion.

Convincing School Administrators

Participants believed the most important topics discussed were: student learning and behavior, nutrition, scheduling, hand washing, operational procedures, and timing of lunch. School nutrition personnel thought administrators would be convinced to schedule recess prior to lunch through research and awareness, observation of children in the cafeteria, student preference, and suggestion. Teachers thought administrators would be convinced through research, observation of students' better behavior and nutritional intake, communication of nutrition needs, and models of success. Parents thought principals could be convinced to schedule recess prior to lunch through research, awareness, and parental requests.

Most Important Topics

The most important topics for administrators were student learning and hand washing. The most important topics for school nutrition personnel were nutrition, hand washing, scheduling, and operational procedures. The most important topics for teachers were nutrition and logistical concerns. The most important topics for parents were behavior, nutrition and learning, and timing of lunch.

Resources for Implementation of Recess Prior to Lunch

The Montana Team Nutrition Web site has a guidebook with resources (including supporting information, examples of schedules, brochures, handouts, parent letters, press releases) available for school personnel who are interested in implementing recess prior to lunch. The guidebook was developed after the Montana Team Nutrition Program worked with four schools to promote a Recess Before Lunch policy (The Montana Office of Public Instruction School Nutrition Programs Pilot Project Report, 2003).

They found that the average amount of food and beverage waste decreased after implementation of the policy. Surveys of administrators, teachers, and school nutrition personnel found that the atmosphere in the cafeterias was more relaxed, quiet, and conducive to eating. They also found there was a dramatic decrease in discipline problems on the playground, in the lunchroom, and in the classroom, and that children returned to class more settled, calmer, and ready to learn. Focus groups with children found that children liked being able to play prior to having lunch.

You may visit the Montana Team Nutrition Web site at <http://www.opi.mt.gov/schoolfood/RecessBL.html>.

For More Information

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