Starving for Recess

Elementary schools that buck tradition and place recess before lunch consistently report improvements in student nutrition and behavior.

By Mary Johnson Patt
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Every weekday, millions of American schoolchildren throw away their half-eaten cafeteria lunches so that they can run outside to play. "We tell kids not to eat and swim right away. And yet here we are, telling them that the quicker they eat, the quicker they get to recess," says Greg Welk, director of clinical research at Iowa State University’s Nutrition and Wellness Research Center.

According to Welk and a growing chorus of educators, poor eating habits, stomachaches and post-recess behavioral problems may be ascribed—at least in part—to a scheduling issue.

The traditional placement of lunch before recess, coupled with the recent decline in overall recess time to meet academic time constraints, forces children to choose between two essential needs: food and exercise. "A lot of schools have cut recess with the mistaken notion that it will improve their academic performance," Welk says. "They are going in the wrong direction. Kids learn better when they have opportunities to move throughout the day. And placing recess before lunch improves the quality of their eating. When they are hungrier, they eat better; then they are better ready to focus in the classroom."

The Recess Before Lunch (RBL) movement has been growing slowly since 2002, when a health team organized in Montana’s Office of Public Instruction started a year-long pilot study of plate waste in four schools willing to make the lunch/recess switch. The initial results of the Montana study were exactly as Greg Welk describes, according to Christine Emerson, director of the state’s school nutrition program: "The kids were eating more, drinking all of their milk. And the schools were finding other benefits, like improved behavior in the classroom," Emerson says. "The teachers didn’t need a calm-down period. The kids were well fed, and felt better in the afternoon because they ate."

Montana OPI’s school nutrition team soon began spreading word of their findings via presentations to school administrators statewide. By 2003, they had published "Recess Before Lunch: A Guide for Success." This free, comprehensive toolkit for implementing RBL is still available online and has been adapted by interested schools, health organizations and government agencies across the country in recent years.

While it would be difficult to secure an exact count of American schools currently offering RBL, fewer than 5 percent were doing so as recently as 2006, according to a study reported in The Journal of Childhood Nutrition & Management. "About 40 percent of Montana’s elementary schools are now implementing recess before lunch," says State Superintendent Denise Juneau, whose advocacy for improving child nutrition extends to support for farm-to-school programs, school gardens and food security reform.

"We’re a huge state, but still very rural," Juneau explains. "The recess-before-lunch innovation was born on the ground. Local schools saw something successful, picked it up, and ran with it. Principals in districts who are doing it offer suggestions to others considering the switch—tips such as how you need to involve staff, students and parents in planning efforts, and to start with a trial period or pilot program and then make adjustments as necessary."
Thinking Outside the Sandbox

According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s 2010 report, “The State of Play,” the vast majority of nearly 2,000 elementary principals polled nationwide by Gallup showed an overwhelming appreciation of the physical, emotional and academic benefits associated with recess. The same principals, however, reported that most behavior-management challenges occur outside of the classroom, during recess or lunch.

The report recommended that schools improve supervision at recess time to diffuse potential problems. In these tough economic times, when many districts are struggling simply to maintain staffs at current levels, the thought of finding money to pay for additional supervisory personnel can be daunting.

Veteran RBL advocates believe there is an affordable alternative to staffing up, an alternative that simply requires a principal’s willingness to rethink the school day. Before she reversed the order of lunch and recess, long-time principal Candy Johnson would find a post-lunch lineup of kids who had gotten into disagreements on the playground waiting outside her office at Montana’s largest K8 school, Hellgate Elementary, in Missoula.

Her switch to RBL had an immediate and dramatic effect. “The biggest change I noticed was that my discipline referrals were cut by at least 80 percent,” Johnson says. “Before they come to the cafeteria, the kids run off some of that excess energy, and they play with friends, which is important for developing social skills. Life is about learning, but it’s also about friendships and establishing relationships. The switch also makes it easier for the teachers, because the kids aren’t so crabby when they get in.”

RBL can definitely be hard to schedule, says Johnson, who keeps watch in the cafeteria every day while 470 young children from 25 classes cycle through. “I really, really had to work on that schedule when we moved into a new building, and it’s tight. If something is off by a minute or two, it can throw hassles my way. But principals who deal with discipline are going to see a tremendous change,” she says. “I just love the recess before lunch.”

The Cleanliness Conundrum

Aside from scheduling, sanitation seems to be the most common area of concern expressed by school administrators, parents and other stakeholders considering the switch to RBL. “One of the problems I had to solve was how we were going to make sure the kids had clean hands before eating,” recalls Wanda McCullough, who has been principal of Laura Dearing Elementary in Las Vegas since before the school switched to RBL.

Washing with soap and water is the most effective method of killing germs, but a logistical impossibility on some campuses. “We’re an older, outside school with only three major restrooms for over 800 students. What we’ve come up with is giving a bottle of hand sanitizer to the teachers that are out on duty,” she says, “and giving every kid a squirt before they go into the cafeteria.”

Many schools install hand-sanitizing dispensers directly on lunchroom walls.

Like every principal in the Clark County (Nev.) School District, McCullough has been working with a RBL schedule since the fall of 2007. That was the starting year prescribed in a new school wellness policy that was adopted by the State Board of Education and subsequently mandated by Clark County Schools.

The district is the fifth-largest in the United States, the educational home to nearly three-quarters of Nevada’s 436,000 schoolchildren. Mary Pike has broad responsibility as the director of science, health, physical education and foreign language in the Curriculum and Professional Development Division of Clark County Schools.

“"The reason for our switch to recess before lunch,” she explains, “is that kids were throwing their food away because they wanted to go out to play. We have so many
First graders from Valley View Elementary School in the Las Cruces (N.M.) Public Schools make their way back from mid-morning recess. Nutritional students from New Mexico State University were enlisted to help with the study. Talk about getting immersed in one’s work. “For one week, we compared nutrient consumption at a control school that had traditional recess after lunch, and one school that had recess before lunch,” Berger says. “We weighed all the food before it was served. We weighed all the leftovers. We separated out the trash into cans containing vegetables, fruit, milk and then everything else: the main dish, dessert and bread.”

By subtracting everything that remained of the original servings, the crews figured out what ended up in children’s bellies. “We had pretty amazing results,” Berger says. “At the school with recess before lunch, we found a 20 percent improvement in vegetable eating, a 36 percent improvement in fruit eating, a 45 percent improvement in milk drinking, and a 35 percent improvement in the category that combined the main dish, breads and dessert.”

Does the fact that RBL kids have more time than their traditional school counterparts do to sit, socialize and eat more food mean they will be more prone to obesity? Not at all, Berger says. “We have turned into a society that wolfs [down] food,” Berger says. “We adults inhale it and then rush off on our busy days. We don’t want to foster that eating habit among children. We want kids to learn to eat slowly, until they are full.

Ideally, to prevent obesity, we need to teach everybody to eat until the point of satiety. Having recess before lunch is one way to do that. We’re pretty excited. And obviously recess before lunch is working, or our principals wouldn’t have adopted it so quickly.”

Laura Dearing Elementary, for example, is an at-risk school with an 87 percent rate of free and reduced lunch. Free breakfast is available to all those in need. As the principal’s concerns go, hand-washing pales in comparison to hunger. “It’s important to me to make sure that kids get at least a good lunch and a good breakfast,” Wanda McCullough says. “Sometimes those are the only meals they have all day.”

**School Plate to Home Plate**

When given time to exercise and then linger over a meal, children not only eat more, but they make better choices about what to consume, says Barbara Berger, a health and nutrition specialist with Las Cruces Public Schools in southern New Mexico. In the past six years, 22 of her district’s 25 elementary schools have come on board with RBL.

Las Cruces principals seem to have been inspired by two main factors: the increase in post-lunch instruction time made possible by relaxed, well-fed children; and the results of a plate-waste study designed early on by Berger and her boss, nutrition director Nancy Cathey.

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