



THE STATE OF *play*

Gallup Survey of Principals on School Recess



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



Summary of FINDINGS

Class size. Standardized testing. The three R's. When most people talk about how to improve education, they tend to focus only on what happens in the classroom. But the most unexpected opportunity to boost learning lies outside the classroom: on the playground at recess.

A new, first-of-its-kind Gallup poll reveals that elementary school principals overwhelmingly believe recess has a positive impact not only on the development of students' social skills, but also on achievement and learning in the classroom. These findings arrive on the heels of groundbreaking research linking more recess to better behavior and focus in the classroom.

Recess doesn't come without challenges. Because it is often disorganized and difficult to manage, recess is the time when principals encounter the vast majority of their school's disciplinary problems. While principals unequivocally see recess as an asset to learning, even a modest effort to improve behavior on the playground can pay significant dividends throughout the school day.

The poll was sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with valuable assistance from the National Association of Elementary School Principals and Playworks.

The Foundation's interest in recess evolved with its understanding that health is not only something that happens at the doctor's office but instead starts in families

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and workplaces and in schools and school playgrounds. Education in particular has a tremendous impact on one's health. If a child's learning environment is disruptive then so is their ability to grow up to be as healthy as they could otherwise be.

BACKGROUND

A growing body of clinical research concludes that play is essential to the social, emotional and physical development of children. But the reality is today's kids spend more of their time in a school classroom than almost anywhere else, and even that time is much less playful than it used to be, given the heavy focus on meeting testing requirements. A 2009 study by the Alliance for Childhood found that playtime is shrinking and even disappearing in kindergarten classrooms. (Miller & Almon, 2009)

Recess has traditionally served as the one outlet during the school day when kids get to recharge their bodies and minds. But those minutes have been steadily eroding. Up to 40 percent of U.S. school districts have reduced or eliminated recess in order to free up more time for core academics, and one in four elementary schools no longer provides recess to all grades. (Zygmunt-Fillwalk and Bidello, 2005; McKenzie and Kahan, 2008). There is already evidence that scaling back recess comes at a cost to learning. In January 2009, the journal *Pediatrics* published a groundbreaking study of 11,000 third-graders, comparing those who had little or no daily recess with those that had more than 15 minutes of recess per day. The findings show that children who have more recess time behave better in the classroom and are likelier to learn more. (Barros, 2009)

There is also research that shows that investing in recess can have a positive impact at schools that struggle with managing student behavior. A Harvard Family Research Project case study of Boston's Ohrenberger Elementary School, which revamped its recess with the help of Playworks, revealed visible



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improvements in several key areas of childhood development. Teachers witnessed how a well-functioning recess could foster supportive relationships among students, create opportunities for meaningful youth involvement, and teach conflict resolution and other life skills.

Playworks also routinely surveys hundreds of faculty members at its partner schools and has found that teachers can reclaim up to 18 minutes of learning time per day because there are fewer problems from the playground spilling over into the classroom.

Ultimately, principals are most capable of evaluating the role that recess plays in the school day and estimating its true value. Any recommendations regarding recess must take into account what principals think because they are uniquely positioned to replicate best practices. Together, these reasons served as the rationale for exploring principals' attitudes toward and experience with recess first hand.

METHODOLOGY

This poll is the first nationwide, scientific survey of elementary school principals devoted to the subject of recess. Between October 8 and October 19, 2009, 1,951 principals and deputy, vice or assistant principals participated in an online survey, conducted by Gallup. The survey questions were largely informed by extensive and respected Gallup research on education and school climate.

The survey sample was provided by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and it reflects a balance of urban, suburban and rural schools and schools of different income levels, defined by the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch (FARL).



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KEY FINDING

1 Recess has a positive impact on achievement and learning.

- *More than 8 in 10 principals report that recess has a positive impact on academic achievement.*
- *Two-thirds of principals report that students listen better after recess and are more focused in class.*

KEY FINDING

2

Recess benefits child development in important, non-academic ways as well.

- *An overwhelming majority of principals (96%) conclude that recess has a positive impact on social development.*
- *An overwhelming majority (97%) of principals believe that recess has a positive impact on general well-being.*



KEY FINDING

3

Recess remains a precious commodity at most schools. Despite its links to achievement, many schools cut recess to meet testing requirements.

- *Half of principals report that students receive between 16-30 minutes of recess per day.*
- *One in five principals indicate that annual yearly progress (AYP) testing requirements have led to a decrease in recess minutes at their school.*

KEY FINDING

4

Despite the connection between recess and good student behavior, schools continue to take recess away as a punishment for bad behavior.

- *A solid majority (77%) of principals report taking recess away as a punishment.*



KEY FINDING

5

Recess is the time of day when schools face the biggest behavior management challenges.

- *Principals report that the **majority of discipline-related problems occur outside of class time (87%)** with the majority of those occurring during recess or lunch (89%).*



KEY FINDING

6

Schools are looking for help with recess.

- *When asked what would improve recess at their schools, they prioritized an increase in the **number of staff to monitor recess, better equipment, and playground management training**, in that order.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

It's time for education policymakers at all levels to take play seriously.

Between clinical evidence and the direct input of our nation's principals, the benefits of recess are well documented. Recess should no longer be treated as an afterthought or an expendable block of time. Instead, it must be recognized as an essential part of the school day. In addition, schools should end the practice of taking recess away as punishment.

Schools should enhance recess to improve learning and school climate.

For all of its contributions to learning, recess is the single biggest source of student disciplinary problems. The good news is that schools could eliminate most of their behavioral headaches if they simply managed their recess more effectively.

The single best way to improve recess is to improve the way it is staffed.

Principals want more and better trained staff on the playground at recess. Because of today's economic realities, many schools may not have the luxury of adding additional staff to recess. That makes it all the more important to ensure that adults on the playground at recess have the training necessary to manage it effectively. With limited and cost-effective training, schools could use existing staff to manage recess with even better results.



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