

Recess Research for State Board of Education

A report from the Center for Disease Control in May 2010 titled “The Association Between School-Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance” assesses 50 studies from 43 articles about physical education, recess, physical activity in the classroom and extracurricular physical activity. There are eight studies about recess and nine on physical activity in the classroom, each of which focus on different aspects and benefits. The review of recess studies concluded “all eight studies found one or more positive associations between recess and indicators of cognitive skills, attitudes, and academic behavior; none of the studies found negative associations.” A similar consensus was seen in review of in-class activity: “Eight of the nine studies found positive associations between classroom-based physical activity and indicators of cognitive skills and attitudes, academic behavior, and academic achievement; none of the studies found negative associations.”¹

Despite the evidence supporting its benefits, there are currently no laws or policies in the State Board of Education rules requiring recess, leaving the decision over having recess up to district boards and in some cases individual schools. However, the concept is mentioned a few times in the state rules:

¹ It should be noted these studies are somewhat limited in that the eight that focused on recess were conducted on elementary school students from grades K-4 and included sample sizes under 100. However, the number of studies cited and their results should be compelling, nonetheless.

The **Education Quality Standards** found in chapter 3 of the State Board Rules explain “Each school shall offer options for students in grades K-12 to participate in at least 30 minutes of physical activity within or outside of the school day. Physical activity may include recess and movement built into the curriculum, but does not replace physical education classes.” This may appear as if the state requires recess. However, it really means recess is optional as long as children are offered 30 minutes of activity every day. If schools simply offer, not require, activities totaling a half hour of movement, they are following the law.

The State Board Rules under chapter 5, **Length of School Day and Year** state: “for grades 3-8, a minimum of 5 1/2 instructional hours, including recess, excluding lunch.” Again, this statement appears to promote or require recess but just means recess may be counted towards class time. This may end up discouraging recess as administrators and district board members may see other traditional classes as more important and recess taking away from their value.

While there are no laws requiring Vermont schools to have recess, there have been numerous recommendations from state agencies proposing that recess be a part of every child’s school day at least through middle school if not for their whole K-12 education. For example, the Agencies of Agriculture, Food and Markets and Education, and the Department of Health published the **Vermont Schools Wellness Policy Guidelines and Implementation** in 2015, stemming from a set of recommendations from 2005 titled “Vermont Nutrition and Fitness Policy Guidelines” and the “Healthy, Hunger Free Kids” act of 2010. The guidelines recommend that individual districts revise their physical activity policies such that children in K-12 schools receive at least 30 minutes of activity a day on top of physical education. The guidelines cite studies from the Vermont Youth Risk Assessment stating only 29% of middle school students

get the recommended 60 minutes per day of exercise, along with only 25% of high schoolers. The 2005 guidelines, the update from 2009, and the 2015 Wellness Guidelines all recommend daily recess for grades K-12.

So, there is evidence that recess and physical activity in general improve student's health and performance in school, as well as evidence suggesting Vermont's children are not getting enough exercise. But what are the opinions of the other stakeholders; do parents and students care? Molly Walsh of the Burlington Free Press published an article in 2010 focusing on a parental push for middle school recess in Burlington schools. The parents argued that physical activity helps "clean out the mental cobwebs" and presented the school board with studies supporting their claims. The article also cited the opposing opinion of then Superintendent of Burlington Schools Jeanne Collins, who found it "hard to think that we could do it without extending the school day," and that other classes the school is required to cover under the Education Quality Standards take precedent.

I reviewed the Burlington School District website as well as both middle school websites, and Shannon, a colleague of mine, called the schools to find out exact recess policies. The websites themselves had little information to offer; the handbooks repeated the state requirement of offering 30 minutes of physical education every day but provided no information about recess policies at the schools or in the district. When Shannon called, she discovered Edmunds middle has completely done away with recess, besides allowing students to jog or walk a single lap around the field outside after lunch. While Hunt students are allowed 10-15 minutes of play outside, it is far from the recommended amount of time needed to give the full benefits seen from a regular 30-minute recess.

I was curious about how schools were matching the required 30 minutes of offered activity a day, but since both schools offer sports afterschool, they both comply. However, this doesn't guarantee all students will *actually get* 30 minutes or more of activity a day. Furthermore, there are likely time and financial constraints preventing some students from participating in afterschool sports; this will be the case no matter what benefits and opportunities schools offer to underprivileged students, which they do currently offer.

There is certainly a reason these proposals and studies haven't been acted upon, and in some cases like that of Edmunds Middle School, recommendations have been acted directly against by taking away recess or offering sports afterschool as the only option for physical activity other than P.E.

While the argument for recess in Vermont schools and at local levels seems to have died down in the past few years, the issue is still receiving national attention in schools and other organizations adopting activity-based policies and curriculums. An article from March 21st of this year in the New York Times titled "Why Kids Shouldn't Sit Still in Class" cites several studies on the impacts of exercise on child learning, as well as schools and Boys and Girls programs using new education tools involving three to five movement-based learning activities per day. The article interviews teachers and administrators from schools in Connecticut and New Jersey as well as a University of Connecticut professor working on one of the programs, and mentions a number of different tools currently being tested and developed.

The article also gives an in-depth yet concise picture of why tools like these have yet to be implemented in greater numbers. There are quotes from a school administrator in Chicago echoing Superintendent Collins sentiment about already limited time for learning, "the bottom

line is with only six and a half hours during the day, our priority is academics.” Lindsay DiStefano, UConn professor of kinesiology, articulates an opposing argument: “We are not thinking about the child as an entire person, how physical activity helps them cope with the stresses of school and actually benefits them in the classroom.”

There is clearly an overwhelming amount of evidence promoting the benefits of physical activity and recess to students from independent organizations, federal and state agencies, parents, and likely students themselves. Vermont’s students are not getting enough exercise, and districts and schools do not seem to be willing to address the problem, themselves. The State Board of Education has the power to help resolve this issue by making recess a requirement in Vermont. I would like to take the opportunity to speak at the next board meeting on the 18th of April, 2017 to briefly present the evidence I have come across and discuss potential solutions with board members.

Sincerely,

Samuel Walker

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Burlington School District website: <http://www.bsdrv.org/>

Edmunds Middle School website: <http://ems.bsdrv.org/>

Hunt Middle School website: <http://hunt.bsdrv.org/>

Length of School Day and Year requirements:

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