

Recess Before Lunch: It Does Make a Difference!

Speaker: **Alice Joe Rainville, SFNS**, Professor, Eastern Michigan University

Overview

The evidence is in and the results are conclusive: recess before lunch is the way to go. When students are allowed to play before eating lunch, they are more likely to eat more and waste less. In addition, children who have recess before lunch are better behaved during lunch and are much more likely to concentrate and focus during afternoon classes.

With such a strong case for recess before lunch, the question remains: why do so many schools still serve lunch before recess?

In a focus group study conducted by the National Food Service Management Institute, school administrators, teachers, school nutrition personnel, and parents voiced concerns, such as logistics about changing the traditional paradigm of lunch before recess. Yet, they also indicated a willingness to consider recess before lunch if the educational and nutritional case is presented convincingly.

Context

Professor Rainville discussed the findings of a study conducted by the National Food Service Management Institute to determine why more schools don't have recess before lunch despite the numerous proven benefits from doing so.

Key Conclusions

• Recess before lunch provides numerous advantages.

Study after study has demonstrated that allowing children to have recess before lunch is superior from both a nutritional and an educational standpoint. Students who have recess before lunch tend to eat more and waste less food than those who have lunch before recess. After recess, children behave better during the lunch period because they have had the opportunity to burn off energy after sitting through hours of classes.

In addition, this good behavior appears to carry over into the afternoon classes. Finally, and not insignificantly, children seem to enjoy lunch before recess better as they don't feel so compelled to rush through lunch so they can go out and play.

• Despite obvious advantages, very few schools have implemented recess before lunch.

According to a 2001 School Health Policies and Program Study, only 4.6% of elementary schools scheduled recess before lunch.

Given the weight of evidence in favor of recess before lunch, the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) set out to study why most schools were still serving lunch before recess. NFSMI conducted focus groups consisting of school administrators, school nutrition personnel, teachers, and parents to determine the barriers to lunch before recess.

They found that tradition is a significant barrier to recess before lunch. In short, what the focus group participants said was essentially that "lunch has always been before recess. It's just the

way that it's always been done." Many school administrators and teachers are simply reluctant to change a system that they perceive has worked perfectly well for them in the past. Even some parents chimed in that they had always had lunch before recess and it seemed to work out just fine for them, so why change it?

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

— Alice Joe Rainville, quoting the sentiments of focus group participants

But, even among educators who are reluctant to change the current schedule, they are conscious that the current schedule is far from perfect. In fact, many educational professionals commented that they have learned to compensate for the reduced attention often shown by students after lunch by teaching the more concentration-intensive courses during the morning.

• Logistical issues are a barrier to recess before lunch.

In many large schools, in practical terms it may prove difficult to coordinate recess before lunch for all students. This is because the limited facilities and resources would make it impossible to allow all students to eat lunch at such a time.

This is particularly true considering that, in some schools, many children don't eat breakfast before school. Any effort that would result in these children being fed at a later time would meet with considerable resistance. Also, administrators, teachers, and school nutrition personnel voiced concerns about how to schedule for hand washing and the removal and storage of cold weather clothing if recess was held prior to lunch.

• The barriers to recess before lunch are not insurmountable.

Despite the barriers, many study participants were impressed with the evidence in favor of recess before lunch. They were particularly impressed with the findings that children eat better and have fewer behavioral issues during the lunch period and the succeeding classroom sessions.

It appears that the key to getting administrators to make a shift is to focus on the educational benefits of better-behaved children in the afternoon. If it can be conclusively demonstrated that lunch before recess is better for the children, school administrators are more likely to forego tradition and resolve the logistical concerns.

Other Important Points

- **More research.** In light of the findings through previous research and during the latest round of focus groups, FSMI is planning a nationwide study to gather additional data on exactly why schools are not implementing recess before lunch.
- **Words of wisdom.** For those who have had success shifting recess to take place before lunch, their advice is to communicate with stakeholders, plan effectively, and consider what is best for the children.