

Recess returns for Amherst kindergartners

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Sep 17, 2009

AMHERST – Three weeks into the school year, kindergartners will get what many of them have been longing for – recess.

“With the support of the superintendent of schools, Clark-Wilkins staff members, and the community, I have been able to adjust the schedules for all kindergarten students, while still maintaining a two-and-a-half hour instructional day,” wrote Gerard St. Amand, principal of Clark-Wilkins School, in a letter sent home with students Tuesday. Recess will be reinstated on Monday, Sept. 21, he wrote.

The recess time has been added onto the end of the morning kindergarten session and the beginning of the afternoon session.

Many parents had voiced concern – and even outrage – earlier this month after their kindergartners returned home from the first day of school with sad faces, reporting that the only time they spent on the playground was the few minutes between arrival and first bell. Some parents were upset that no one had told them recess was canceled for kindergartners. Others decried the loss of time for socializing and unstructured play.

Removing recess added 15 minutes of instructional time to students’ 2½-hour day. With Clark-Wilkins’ designation earlier this year as a “School In Need of Improvement,” that additional instructional time can be valuable, educators told parents and School Board members at a meeting two weeks ago.

“There are many children moving into the upper grade levels who are not meeting proficiency standards, and we realize that proficiency starts down here. The more we do (to address deficiencies) in kindergarten and first grade, the less we’ll have to do later,” said St. Amand.

The SINI designation did not cause administrators to initially remove kindergarten recess, but it did “highlight” the need to rethink scheduling priorities, he said.

St. Amand said 15-minute recess is being brought back without impacting classroom time. For morning kindergartners, recess will be tacked onto the end of the school day and move dismissal to 11:15-11:25 a.m. Afternoon students will begin their day with a 15-minute recess, scheduled immediately following the drop-off period, which has been moved up to 11:50-noon to accommodate the change.

Whether recess will be fully restored to last year’s levels for grades 1-4, which lost all but 25 minutes of recess, has not yet been decided, said St. Amand. “But I am going to predict that some grade levels will maintain the status quo for recess,” he said.

“I very much appreciate that (administrators and staff) took the time to listen to parents and work out a compromise,” said Christine Mikkola, whose son attends kindergarten at Clark in the afternoon. But she goes “back and forth” on how she feels about the afternoon recess placement, she said.

"I'd probably prefer recess after school, but better to have it before than to have nothing," said Mikkola. One benefit of the placement is that expending a little energy before school starts will help her son focus better during class, she said.

Midday recess wasn't a viable option. "We tried once to do that and had parent volunteers come in to help," but that didn't really work out because of weather changes and (unplanned) inside recess, Liz Alexakos, one of three kindergarten teachers at Clark, told parents at a kindergarten orientation meeting last week.

St. Amand also addressed the recess issue at the kindergarten orientation meeting, letting parents know then that he was "very, very, very close to being able to provide kindergarteners with recess beyond the instructional time."

At the meeting, kindergarten teachers outlined the kinds of movement and other activities kindergartners engage in throughout their day, explained how the teachers will "team" on late-start days to offer group physical education activities, and noted that during the 15 minutes per day designated for snacks and learning centers students have the flexibility to choose from a selection of activities and get "free play" time when finished with their work and snack.

Administrators didn't notify parents about the kindergarten recess removal because they wanted to keep it "low-profile" until after they tried it, St. Amand has said. Also, until last week faculty had not yet met to review plans for the year and to gauge teachers' response to the recess change.

Parents responded immediately to the change, however. A concerned parent circulated an e-mail during the first week of school urging parents to speak up against rescinding recess. The note included a link to "Recess – It's Indispensable," an article originally published in the peer reviewed professional journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

"We found no research to support administrators' assumptions that test scores required by No Child Left Behind could be improved by keeping children in the classroom all day," states the NAEYC article.

Not all parents were concerned about the removal of kindergarten recess. One father said he felt that recess is unnecessary given the short time that the children are in school. Several mothers said they were against recess because their youngsters find the atmosphere overwhelming and so do not want to play on the playground.

But the new recess plan applies to all kindergartners. Recess is not optional because staff from both Clark and Wilkins had to be reassigned to make recess happen, St. Amand said.

Parents who choose to not have their children participate in recess will have to come into the main office and sign their children out of school each day.