

The Right to Play: A Policy Guide to California Recess Priorities

REBECCA A. LONDON

FEBRUARY 2022



UC SANTA CRUZ

Campus +
Community

Why Recess, Why Now?

Play is a critical input to positive child and youth development. Recess is the only time in the school day when students can learn and practice social and emotional skills as well as be physically active, connect with friends, and take a break from the structure of the classroom. Today, in the aftermath of the trauma and isolation wrought by COVID-19, California's students need the healing time of recess.

The events of the past two years—the pandemic, wildfires, and calls for racial equity—have had devastating effects on children's and youth's isolation, stress, and material hardships which has resulted in unprecedented levels of mental health problems. In January, Children Now's *2022 California Children's Report Card* gave the state a D+ in addressing the dramatic uptick in young people's mental health needs. Schools are not equipped to handle these emergent needs through individual interventions like counseling, but they can pursue a healing agenda for the whole school through play.

Even before the events of the last two years, recess had gained traction among experts as a crucial time in the school day. The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a formal statement declaring the importance of a quality recess in 2013. In the summer of 2020, an international group of scholars came together to form the *Global Recess Alliance*, which promotes the notion that a high-quality recess is a place of healing for students, and without that healing, the business of learning will not proceed as intended.

Recess is a necessary break in the day for optimizing a child's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. In essence, recess should be considered a child's personal time, and it should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons.

American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013

Still, many students do not have access to daily recess. Nationally, surveys show that those living in urban areas and in lower-income neighborhoods, as well as students of color, have less (or no) school recess time compared to other students. And, even when recess is provided, it may not be a space that promotes student engagement and prosocial behavior. Bullying can occur during this free time and without attention to space and activities, students can experience exclusion or boredom as well. In contrast, a quality recess that provides opportunities for play, socialization, rest, and rejuvenation yields many positive outcomes for students and schools, including improving students' well-being, school engagement, behavior, focus, and attendance, and contributing to a positive school climate. When students are engaged at recess, bullying declines and teachers spend less class time resolving problems left over from recess.

Six core principles for recess

- *Every child can play every day*
- *Students choose the activities or games that make them happy*
- *Students have conflict resolution tools (e.g., rock-paper-scissors)*
- *Adults play alongside children*
- *Play is not a reward that can be revoked*
- *Everyone is welcome to join the activities*

Playworks

The national non-profit organization Playworks—headquartered in Oakland, CA— is a leader in recess design and operation. Playworks created a free tool for gauging recess quality called the *Great Recess Framework* and has other resources available such as a game library and information on how to incorporate play into social-emotional and academic learning.

What California Policy Can Do

California currently has limited guidelines for recess provision and no way to track how schools are, or are not, implementing school breaks. There are four ways that the state can support students in accessing daily recess and ensure that all students have opportunities for safe and healthy breaks at school.

Recommendation 1: Require Daily Recess for Grades TK-8

Current state law merely *encourages* schools to offer recess. This should be strengthened to *require* at least 40 minutes of breaktime per day for all schoolchildren in grades TK-8. Some states have mandated a certain number of minutes of physical activity rather than recess breaks, which focuses attention on only one potential benefit of this time. Allocated minutes for recess or breaks is a preferred way to implement and protect this time. In addition, California could amend current regulations to count recess in instructional minutes, as Illinois and Utah have recently done, if that makes implementation more feasible.

Recommendation 2: Ban Withholding Recess for Any Reason

Current state law is worded passively, stating that a pupil shall not be required to stay in school during breaks. Legislation should strengthen and activate this provision by stating that school staff are prohibited from withholding recess or break time from any student or class for punishment or to make up missed school work.

Recommendation 3: Train Monitors to Support Recess as a Time for Building Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and School Climate

Ensuring that schools breaks are safe, healthy, and inclusive will support a school climate that helps students to heal from trauma and provides a proactive approach to SEL and conflict resolution throughout the school day. Unfortunately, the paraprofessional staff who monitor breaks are often not included in schoolwide initiatives or professional development offered to other staff even though adult break monitors are the key for ensuring that students have a quality break. Recess monitors should be provided paid release time to attend child and youth development trainings and should be included in schoolwide practices aimed at building school climate and students' social-emotional skills.

Recommendation 4: Establish Data Collections to Track Recess Provision and Innovation

There are no statewide data collections to document whether schools include daily recess in their bell schedules, how much recess is provided, policies on withholding recess, and any efforts made to improve the quality of recess. To ensure equitable access to recess, we must better document these practices statewide. There are three mechanisms that could be deployed for these purposes: 1) the LCAP, which has a section on school climate; 2) the California School Dashboard, which also has a section on school climate; and 3) the Local Wellness Policy, which currently has no guidance for detailing recess practices as a context for wellness.

Resource List

American Academy of Pediatrics (Murray, Robert, Catherine Ramstetter, et al.) "The Crucial Role of Recess in School." *Pediatrics* 131, no. 1 (2013): 183-188. Available at: <https://www.publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article-split/131/1/183/30893/The-Crucial-Role-of-Recess-in-School>

Children Now. *2022 California Children's Report Card*. Available at: <https://www.childrennow.org/portfolio-posts/2022-california-childrens-report-card/>

Global Recess Alliance. *Statement on Recess*. Available at: <https://globalrecessalliance.org/recess-statement/>

London, Rebecca A. *Rethinking Recess: Creating Safe and Inclusive Playtime for All Children in School*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2019.

London, Rebecca A. *The Importance of Recess in California Elementary School Reopening*. Stanford, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education, 2021. Available at: <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/importance-recess-california-elementary-school-reopening>.

Massey, William. "How Recess Helps Students Learn." *The Conversation*, February 14, 2022. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/how-recess-helps-students-learn-175986>

Playworks. "Great Recess Framework." Available at: <https://www.playworks.org/resources/great-recess-framework/>

This brief was prepared by Rebecca A. London, Associate Professor of Sociology and Faculty Director of Campus + Community. I would like to thank my colleagues at Playworks and members of the Global Recess Alliance for contributing to my knowledge and understanding of how the pandemic has affected students worldwide. I acknowledge funding for my research from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Campus + Community

Campus + Community is a hub at UC Santa Cruz for coordinating and supporting partnerships between UCSC researchers and interested community-based partners. With support from the Institute for Social Transformation, we encourage actionable and ethical research with a social justice mission that highlights the needs, assets, and aspirations of local communities.