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ENGL 1200

Recess in Schools: Disposable or Essential?

Most educators know that in today's society changes are a constant in the school systems. One of the most well-known changes dealing with the school systems most recently is the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act during the Bush administration (Henley). There were many parts of this act that changed the school systems all over the nation; more tests, a more detailed, concentrated curriculum, and more federal funding for schools that demonstrate high accuracy (Henley). While these examples sound like superior additions to the classrooms, most educators would agree that they tend to hold back the students in the public school systems. One of the problems that even school administrators may not even notice are the consequences on recess and physical education. Due to the multiple additions into the curriculum and classroom, teachers have more material to cover during the school day. Because school hours have not increased, there have been deletions of "unnecessary" options. Recess and physical education are considered pointless by many. According to Leslie Johnson, the author of *First, do no harm: An argument against mandatory high-stakes testing for students with intellectual disabilities*, "recess is a waste of time that would be better spent on academics" (Henley).

Studies have shown that starting in the 1980s public school systems started thinning down students' recess time in order to create more time for instruction (Recess—It's

Indispensable!). The study had alarming statistics that showed just how bad students nation-wide were affected. The study conducted by the National Center for Education in 2005 showed that 'seven percent of first-graders and eight percent of third-graders had never had recess; and 14 percent of first-graders and 15 percent of third-graders had only 1 to 15 minutes of recess a day.' The same study, conducted after the No Child Left Behind Act was established, stated that 20 percent of the country's school systems decreased their recess time. The average cut was 50 minutes a week (Recess—It's Indispensable!).

The removal of recess or PE may not seem like a problem to various individuals; however, this decision negatively affects our students every day in immense amounts. The elimination of recess and PE in public schools is occurring all around the nation and is causing a greater pressure on an increase in childhood obesity, poor academics, and stress levels among students.

Of all the problems our students encounter with the deletion of recess, the increased risk of obesity is the most detrimental. Obesity has been a rising problem across our nation's society as a whole. Childhood obesity has more than tripled in the past 30 years (Miller); most of these children are elementary aged students. There are many different causes that lead to obesity; while a lot of the causes are based on the child's home life, school also takes part as a big role in this problem. According to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion- Division of Adolescent and School Health, one of the top five strategies to obstruct childhood obesity is to strengthen a school's physical activities (Wechsler). It is impossible to strengthen these activities when they are

being cut down or even removed. Recess and PE have many benefits to children's physical well being.

Studies have shown that students who are more active during school hours are more likely to stay active after school hours than students who have no physical activities. These students are likely to participate in county league sports rather than play video games. The children that have no luxury of recess or PE are most likely to live sedentary lifestyles (Recess—It's Indispensable!). In many school systems' curricula, health is still included as a course that should be adequately taught. With recess and PE being denied to the students, are we really teaching them how to be healthy? Not if they don't include daily, healthy, physical activity. "Curricula are more likely to be effective in improving student health behaviors when they teach skills needed to adopt healthy behaviors, provide ample opportunities to practice those skills, and focus on helping students overcome barriers to adopting behaviors." (Wechsler). With ample amounts of recess and PE, many obesity problems can be solved; our youth will not have to suffer through high risks for cardiovascular disease, bone and joint problems, or sleep apnea. Our young generation will also be free of the complications that could occur in their adulthood such as heart disease, type two diabetes, stroke, osteoarthritis, and several types of cancer (Childhood Obesity).

The elimination of recess is also affecting students' performances. While the No Child Left Behind Act was created to boost test efficiency scores, our student's grades are going in the opposite direction. The grade deficiencies can easily be related to the cutting back of physical activity time during school hours. Spending all hours of the day sitting in a

classroom is not ideal for a young student. Recess is necessary for young students and when it is taken away, the students show the major consequences. Recent studies have shown that a break for physical activity during the school day is more beneficial to test scores than not having a time outside the room. It also strengthens memory skills and vocabulary skills for younger children (Pytel, Webber). The break from the classroom has been shown to be extremely beneficial for children with special needs and diagnosed attention deficit disorders. It allows them to let free their physical tensions and clear their mind. After recess these children have proven to be less restless and more focused on the task at hand (Recess—It's Indispensable!). There have been many studies over the past fifteen years that show a direct correlation with brain function and maturity connecting to recess (Pellegrini). With daily recess in an adequate amount, students' test grades are likely to increase. *Young Children* has found no evidence in the benefit of eliminating recess, "We found no research to support administrators' assumptions that test scores required by No Child Left Behind Act could be improved by keeping children in the classroom all day." (Recess—It's Indispensable!)

The absence of recess is also causing mental health problems among our younger students (Webber). When participating in daily recess, children learn to relieve stress and anxiety that is acquired throughout the school day (Pytel). Donna Steigleman, a first grade teacher at W.T. Griggs Elementary, sees this every day; "My students are freaking out about how good or bad they do in their work. Normally teachers wouldn't complain, but it's an unhealthy obsession... I've never seen my students as stressed as I am about their comprehension." Students with a high stress level at such young ages are more likely to

become easily depressed at an older age than students with healthy stress levels (D. Steigleman).

The main cause of the students' stress is too much information crammed into their day. They are constantly being held to a high standard and often reminded of the pressure to succeed brought on by the No Child Left Behind Act. Tiffany Ostrom, a third grader that attends Jarvisburg Elementary, feels overloaded constantly at school; "We have a lot of work all the time. It's a lot to do. I'm tired when I get home to school because even there I have more work to do" (Ostrom). Many individuals wonder why young students even have homework after spending eight hours a day in school. "I send homework home because there simply isn't enough time in the day to get everything squeezed in. I'm constantly searching for time-efficient solutions but it all comes down to one thing; everything's got to get done and there is just never enough time for everything to be covered in class" (Steigleman). The authors of "Robbing Elementary School Students of Their Childhood: The Perils of No Child Left Behind" believe that "physical activity does not reduce academic learning and it may actually increase it". Recess would allow the students to have time where they don't have to worry about grades or tests.

Recess and PE also help our students' mental health by giving time for casual interaction with their peers. While in the classroom, students don't have much time to develop and contain healthy relationships with their peers due to the enhanced curriculums. Recess is a time where children play, laugh, and converse about things that do not involve schoolwork. This is also the time where the building blocks of relationships happen. This is a

place where children learn how to accept diversity and how to socialize with others that are around them (Webber). It not only allows them to meet other students, but to make friends that are not in their classroom. This could also help create lifelong connections with others, creating a social network for adulthood (Webber). Research studies have shown that children who actively take part in recess have a better self esteem; it is a place for “children to learn about their own abilities, perseverance, self-direction, responsibility, and self-acceptance. They begin to understand which behaviors result in approval or disapproval from their peers.”

Recess is essential to our young generation for many reasons. The removal of recess could result in many problems with our young students; while there have been laws passed in a small handful of states that mandate recess, we are still not seeing enough reinforcement. Recess is necessary for elementary aged students and should be mandated more heavily than it has been. With the increase of recess and physical activity students could develop good physical habits, acquire better grades, and become children again without high levels of stress. Article 31 of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child aims to protect: “The right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.” (Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Let’s not deny our young students the right to recess.

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