



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

# Recess Rules

Why the undervalued  
playtime may be America's  
best investment for healthy  
kids and healthy schools



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parents, teachers and school administrators have a tough job. Helping children achieve academically is challenge enough. But raising and teaching kids today also means dealing with such seemingly disparate issues as depression, violence and obesity. What happens in the classroom is essential to preparing children for success, but what happens outside of the classroom, and even on the playground, is just as important – especially considering that only **36 percent**<sup>\*</sup> of children meet doctors' recommendations for physical activity.

As schools experience increased pressure to perform on standardized tests and face discipline challenges on the playground, many are cutting back on programs that engage kids in physical activity of any kind, let alone activities that are fun and meaningful.

Studies, however, show that play is essential to the physical, emotional and social development of every child.\*\* It is also the single most effective strategy for increasing physical activity among children. Providing opportunities for safe and healthy play should be an important part of any strategy for preventing violence, creating an environment for academic achievement, promoting emotional well-being and improving children's health.

There are a growing number of parents, educators, policy-makers, law enforcement professionals and health experts who have come to recognize the benefits of play and are looking for ways to help kids be more physically active in a healthy and safe environment.

Where should teachers, principals and parents find the time during the busy school week to provide kids with the physical activity and learning opportunities associated with play? Should we invest in P.E. or focus on after-school programs? And to what extent could recess play be part of the solution?

This report analyzes several sources of data to identify where opportunities for increasing children's physical activity exist and to understand the factors that could contribute to or impair efforts to maximize those opportunities. This report also explores one model for addressing children's health through play and raises questions about the funding disparities that exist in the universe of physical activity.

The report is informed by the experience of a promising and innovative program, **Sports4Kids**, which is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Sports4Kids has successfully brought safe and healthy play to 130 schools in **Baltimore, Boston, Washington DC, San Francisco, Oakland and San Jose.**

\* Source: America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2007, published by [childstats.gov](http://childstats.gov)

\*\* American Academy of Pediatrics: The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds, October 2006



## HERE IS WHAT WE LEARNED:

- ★ Recess offers nearly half of the available opportunity to promote physical activity among kids during the school year. Trying to improve children's health without focusing on recess forfeits our best chance for reaching students with the greatest need.
- ★ The most vulnerable kids – those who come from minority or low-income families – are being shortchanged when it comes to recess.
- ★ Unlike P.E. and after-school programs, there is very little dedicated funding available to improve the quality of recess.



Not surprisingly, all work and no play isn't good for the health and well-being of children. Interestingly though, if kids are fit, they are more likely to be fit to learn. The overall learning environment matters, what happens outside of the classroom impacts what happens in the classroom and kids who are healthier learn better. By investing in recess and making safe and healthy play a part of every school day, we can give kids what they need to succeed in school and in life.

**Why Structured Play?** This report specifically looks at opportunities to increase structured play for kids – meaning games and physical activities that are taught and led by a trained adult. In many communities today kids grow up not really knowing how to engage in healthy play. They don't know how to make up and follow the rules or how to resolve conflicts. Too often, games end in a fight – and more complicated games break down before they can really get going. Most kids end up on the sidelines, disengaged. And when this behavior is carried over from the schoolyard into the classroom, it creates a serious student management problem before, during and after school.

**By providing structured play opportunities** led by trained adults, we can teach kids useful tools like rock, paper, scissors to resolve conflicts and keep games going. After just a few weeks of daily encouragement and game instruction, we see significant changes in the behavior of children on and off the playground. Those who previously stood on the sidelines start playing. Children quickly become physically active in an organized and safe way. They become noticeably confident as they take on leadership roles and learn problem-solving, self-discipline and respect for themselves and others. As a result, the playground becomes positive and energetic, creating ripple effects in the classroom.

## METHODOLOGY

# 1,055

schools surveyed

**DATA**

Data used to determine the available structured physical activity minutes per week was originally collected in two surveys by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2005.

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006106>

In addition, we analyzed data from the After-School Programs and Activities Survey (ASPA), which was based on a sample of 11,684 students in kindergarten through grade 8, representing a weighted total of 36,185,760 students.

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/afterschool/index.asp>

**INTERVIEWS**

In the spring of 2007, Sports4Kids interviewed public elementary school principals by phone to better understand how recess impacts the school environment. Most of the principals interviewed represented large urban schools with large non-white enrollment. In addition, we focused on schools with and without the additional investment in recess time through Sports4Kids, in order to gain insight into how recess affects the overall school day and to assess whether efforts to enhance recess can have a positive impact on the school climate.

**CASE STUDY**

Throughout the 2006-07 school year, the Harvard Family Research Project, which is affiliated with the Harvard Graduate School of Education, conducted a comprehensive evaluation of Ohrenberger Elementary School in Boston, Massachusetts in its first year with Sports4Kids. The goal of the research was to learn how elementary schools in low-income areas are impacted by increasing opportunities for physical activity and safe, meaningful play. The evaluation studied outcomes for the entire school, for specific classrooms and for individual students.

**FUNDING REVIEW**

We conducted a general review of major public and private programs aiming to improve physical activity both in-school and after-school, including programs from the U.S. Department of Education, National Youth Sports Initiative, California's After School Education and Safety program and support from private philanthropies.



↘ The goal of the research was to learn how elementary schools in low-income areas are impacted by increasing opportunities for physical activity and safe, meaningful play.



## KEY FINDINGS

1

Recess is the single biggest opportunity to raise the level of physical activity for all children.

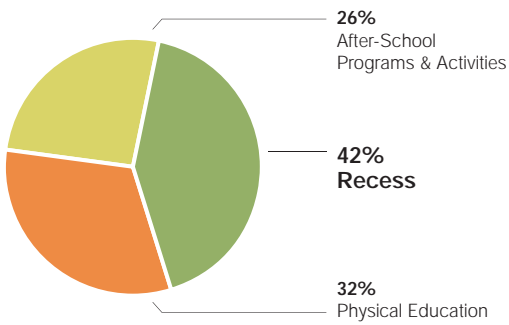
Nationwide, kids between first and sixth grade spend more time on average per week in recess than they do in P.E. or various kinds of after-school programs. Chart 1 shows how these programs compare as a percentage of total opportunity for physical activity. “Opportunity” is defined as the average minutes per day multiplied by the percentage of children who participate. With **42 percent** of the available opportunity for physical activity, recess represents the most powerful strategy to get the most kids moving, followed by P.E. with **32 percent.** After-school programs and activities only represent **26 percent** of the available opportunity for physical activity.

Recess offers nearly half of the opportunity available to promote physical activity among kids during the school year. Trying to improve children's health without focusing on recess forfeits our best chance for reaching the most students.



CHART 1

**Total Opportunity for Physical Activity**



**Here's Why:**

The vast majority of schools schedule both recess and P.E., but while schools typically offer some recess every day, kids on average get P.E. time only 2.5 times a week.

After-school programs offer less opportunity because far fewer kids participate in them. Only 17 percent of the nation's children attend a school or center-based after-school program weekly, and the majority of these programs emphasize academic enrichment over any kind of outdoor play.

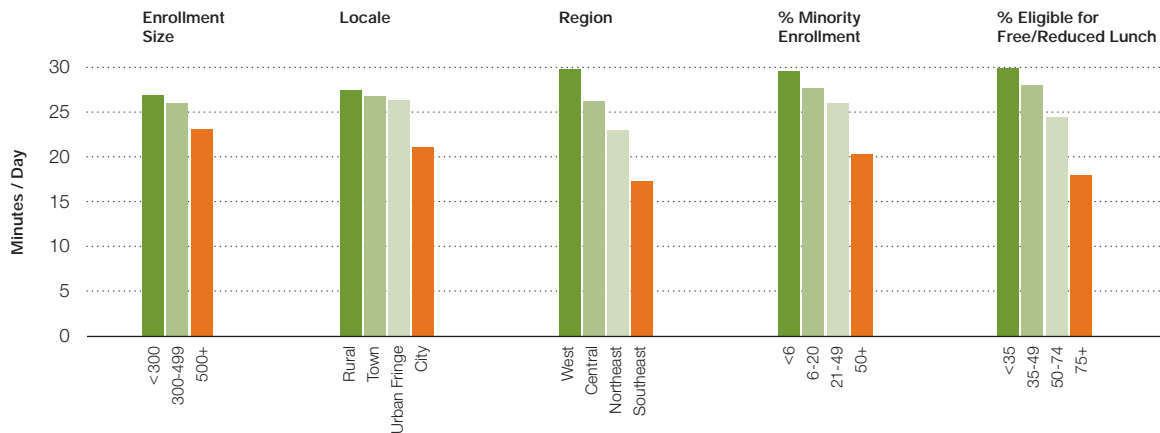
There are other activities – like scouting, athletic leagues and music lessons – that are not based in an after-school program, but only 40 percent of kids participate in those activities.

↘ Overall, recess clearly reaches the most kids for the most minutes each week. Anyone looking for the most direct way to engage children in meaningful, fun physical activity should put recess at the top of the list.

2

The most vulnerable children are getting shortchanged when it comes to recess.

CHART 2  
Elementary School Recess Selected School Characteristics



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), "Foods and Physical Activity in Public Elementary Schools: 2005."

**Chart 2** breaks down how recess is offered in different types of public elementary schools. It shows that children who go to large, urban schools receive the fewest recess minutes per week. And schools with more than 50 percent minority enrollment and the lowest income levels – as defined by the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch – are the ones most likely to have fewer minutes for recess or even lose recess altogether. Among the regions in the U.S., the Southeast is at the bottom of the list when it comes to recess time available.

There are at least two likely explanations for these trends. The first is that many urban school districts simply have shorter school days to begin with. In addition, the principals interviewed for this report said that large, urban schools with

high percentages of minority and low-income enrollment are most likely to increase classroom time at the expense of recess in an effort to keep up with tightening academic standards.

## 3

Schools struggle to manage recess effectively and are desperate for help.

Recess tends to be a headache for most principals, especially those at low-income schools. They struggle with managing recess and tend to experience it as a setting for negative behavior. Three principals interviewed literally said, "Recess is hell!" The following comments from principals illustrate the breadth of responses:

*"Recess is when all the trouble starts: the teasing, the fights, the bullying, the injuries, the referrals."*

*"I know it's lunch recess when the office is full and the nurse is cringing."*

*"It's me and two or three teacher's aides. We are seriously outnumbered."*

*"I wish our yard monitors were more active, but they don't really get any training, and they come in for two hours a day."*

Staffing recess is a particular problem for principals, in part because teachers are typically not on duty during lunch and because part-time staff or volunteers on the playground lack the training necessary to run an effective recess. In fact, all too often the principals find themselves staffing recess, unsuccessfully.

The fact that principals often experience recess as chaos and that recess is inadequately staffed are clearly related. More appropriate staffing and training would go a long way toward eliminating recess-related headaches and disruptions that spill over into the classroom environment.

## 4

Reclaiming recess is possible and offers significant benefits for the kids and schools.

A new case study by the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) and individual interviews with principals who have brought Sports4Kids into their schools reveal that **a modest investment in recess can have a positive ripple effect throughout the school.** While there are other programs that seek to help principals improve the quality of recess, we highlight Sports4Kids because of its successful replication in schools across the country.

After just one year with Sports4Kids on its playground, Ohrenberger Elementary School in Boston, Mass. saw visible improvements in several key areas of childhood development. Teachers witnessed how a well-functioning recess could foster supportive relationships among students, create opportunities for meaningful youth involvement, and teach conflict resolution and other life skills.



"I've been here for seven years, and recess was always the time that teachers would come and get our kids after lunch and we were frightened of what we would find when we would open the door ... There would be numerous fights and things like that ... and [this year] within about three weeks, they knew the games, they knew what to play, what to do, and we haven't come out and found very many problems at all this year at recess."

— Ohrenberger fifth grade teacher



Photos by Brandon Joseph Baker

In addition, there was evidence that the culture on the playground became less competitive and more supportive. Kids reported feeling safer at recess, enjoying being physically active and being more likely to get involved in activities. Both students and teachers reported being more productive in the classroom. HFRP identified two key reasons for the transformation. The first was the level of student participation: by playing games that got everyone involved, kids were more likely to stay focused and involved. The second factor was having an adult present and actively participating in games: kids tended to be more motivated to play when adults were directly involved in recess, and games were more likely to go smoothly.



*"The kids are much less aggressive and competitive. Even if they could organize themselves well enough to play kickball or something at recess before, it would turn into a fight over everyone wants the ball, or wants to be in charge, and arguing over who got out. There's none of that at all. It doesn't happen at all – it's a really wonderful thing!"*

— Ohrenberger Fourth Grade Teacher

5

Recess is at a major disadvantage for funding.

Recess may be the number one opportunity to boost the level of physical activity among children, but it is the **least likely area to receive funding** when compared with after-school activities and P.E. There are few programs and even fewer resources devoted to improving the quality of play at recess, making Sports4Kids and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation rare exceptions.

TABLE 1

Examples of Funding Towards Opportunities for Physical Activity

After-School Activities:	Phys. Ed. Activities:	Recess:
<p><b>\$1 Billion</b> Department of Education's 21st Century Fund</p>	<p><b>\$70 Million</b> U.S. Department of Education's Physical Education Program</p>	<p><b>\$?????</b></p>

In fact, the vast majority of funding available for structured play and physical activity during the school year goes to after-school programs. The Department of Education's 21st Century Fund, for example, disburses nearly \$1 billion each year for school and center-based after-school programs. Similarly, many states dedicate significant resources for after-school programs. California's After School Education and Safety program, which began in 2004-2005, provides up to \$455 million for before- and after-school activities. There is nothing even remotely comparable for recess at either the federal or state level.

The U.S. Department of Education's Physical Education Program distributes grants totaling more than \$70 million

annually "to initiate, expand, and improve physical education programs for K-12 students in order to help them make progress toward meeting state standards for physical education." There is also an increasing number of state programs like Texas Fit Now that provide grants to schools to support P.E. Schools looking for equivalent help with recess have no similar options.

As long as public and private funding continues to bypass recess time, we will continue to miss major opportunities to improve the health and well-being of our neediest kids and schools. The success of Sports4Kids shows that there is a lot of room for innovative and effective programming in schools and during recess time.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recess represents an unparalleled chance to increase physical activity among an extraordinary number of kids in the U.S. It's also an underutilized opportunity to improve the overall learning environment in our schools. Principals and teachers want help, and case studies show that focused efforts can turn kids and entire schools around for the better.







## TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THESE OPPORTUNITIES, WE MUST:

**Treat recess as an integral part of every school day.**

Parents, teachers, and school and district administrators need to withstand the pressure to squeeze out recess. By investing in recess, time in the classroom is likely to be more productive and kids less disruptive.

**Put trained adults on the playground.**

Recess – as it is currently experienced by students and adults alike in most schools – won't lead to the benefits discussed in this report. To get the most out of recess, we need well-trained professionals who know how to facilitate structured play on the playground. Programs like Sports4Kids are particularly effective and should be replicated and expanded. We are also hopeful that a new generation of trained adult volunteers could be part of the solution.

**Increase public and private funding for recess.**

Given the opportunity to improve student health and the overall school climate, investing new resources to help schools enhance recess time should be easy to justify. Federal and state lawmakers should consider making programs that fund after-school programs and P.E. eligible to fund recess programs. In fact, Sports4Kids has found the greatest success when integrating recess with P.E. and after-school programs; funding should reflect this as well. In addition, private funders concerned about education, violence prevention and children's health should invest in recess and in the organizations that can provide trained staff and volunteers to schools most in need.

## ABOUT SPORTS4KIDS

**Sports4Kids** is a nonprofit providing safe, healthy physical activity at low-income schools so that every child has the chance to play. Sports4Kids is delivered by well-trained, fun adults working at elementary and middle schools to support a healthier environment where kids can play, learn and grow on the playground and in the classroom. Sports4Kids launched its first programs in two Berkeley schools in **1996**. Now, during the 2007-08 school year, Sports4Kids reaches **50,000 kids** in



**130 schools** in Baltimore, Boston, Washington DC, and throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

Throughout the year, Sports4Kids coaches become part of the school community, working from 9am to 5pm each day with kids in the schoolyard during recess, class time and after school. Sports4Kids coaches introduce kids to games like Four Square – which are disappearing from our playgrounds. They teach them simple ways to avoid fights and keep games going. They help kids learn about healthy nutrition and violence prevention. And Sports4Kids' innovative youth leadership program gives kids the chance to take charge of their own health and well-being – as well as their communities.



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We are passionate about our responsibility to share information and foster understanding of the impact of our grantmaking – what works, what doesn't and why. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, we expect to make a difference in your lifetime.

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