Supporting Recess in Elementary Schools

Recess provides students with a needed break from their structured school day. It can improve children’s physical, social, and emotional well-being, and enhance learning. Recess helps children meet the goal of 60 minutes of physical activity (PA) each day, as recommended by the US Department of Health and Human Services. National organizations (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Pediatrics) recommend that districts provide at least 20 minutes of daily recess for all students in elementary schools.

This brief highlights areas where school recess policy opportunities exist, and where policies are well-established. It summarizes policy actions taken by public school districts, all 50 states and the District of Columbia from the 2011–2012 school year, from the Bridging the Gap (BTG) study. All policies were collected and coded by BTG researchers using a standardized method based on evidence-based guidelines and recommendations from expert organizations and agencies. Complete details about how these data were collected and compiled are available in the companion methods documentation.

WHAT ACTIONS HAVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS & STATES TAKEN?

Few school district wellness and state policies address daily recess for elementary school or address recess as part of policy provisions for daily physical activity. During the 2011–2012 school year, the BTG study found that:

**At the District Level:**
- 60% of districts had no policy regarding daily recess for elementary school students (Figure 1).
- Only 22% of districts required daily recess for elementary school students (Figure 1). Fewer than half of these districts required at least 20 minutes of daily recess.
- Just 18% of districts recommended daily recess, less than one-third of which encouraged at least 20 minutes of daily recess.
- Less than 7% of districts required a set amount of time for PA during the school day; two-thirds of these districts included recess in the definition of PA.

**At the State Level:**
- Just 3% of districts suggested a specific amount of time for PA throughout the school day; fewer than half of these districts included recess in the definition of PA.
- Only 5 states required daily recess for elementary school students (Figure 1). Among these, only one state required at least 20 minutes of daily recess.
- 8 states recommended daily recess for elementary school students (Figure 1). Among these, 2 states recommended at least 20 minutes of daily recess.
- 10 states required a set amount of time for PA during the school day; half of these included recess in the definition of PA.
- 4 states recommended a specific amount of time for PA throughout the school day, and only 1 of these states included recess in the definition of PA.

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ENCOURAGING DAILY RECESS

There are a number of evidence-based strategies and expert recommendations to improve recess in schools. The actions below can help you implement these strategies and recommendations. See the Resources section at the end for links to documents and websites that provide additional information.

**STATES**
- Develop and adopt daily recess policies, and monitor district and school implementation.
- Provide districts with training and technical assistance for revising district wellness and recess policies that align with national recommendations.

**SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS**
- Create a school health council that includes district and community stakeholders to implement, monitor, and evaluate activities that align with wellness policy goals.
- Review and revise the district wellness policy to align with national recess recommendations and assist schools with implementing the policy.
- Work with districts to upgrade and maintain PA equipment, sports fields, courts, and playgrounds that are used for recess.
- Assist districts with monitoring and reporting on the implementation of district wellness policies.

**What Can You Do?**

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- Work with districts to upgrade and maintain PA equipment, sports fields, courts, and playgrounds that are used for recess.
- Assist districts with monitoring and reporting on the implementation of district wellness policies.

**REFERENCES**

5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School health guidelines to promote healthy eating and physical activity. MMWR 2011;60:1-76.