# Is Recess Important for Kids or a Waste of Time? Here’s What the Research Says

*BY KATIE REILLY OCTOBER 23, 2017 2:19 PM EDT*

In recent years, more parents have begun fighting back against a trend of reducing recess time across America and are calling on schools to give children a chance to play. Last year, Rhode Island enacted a law requiring 20 minutes of consecutive recess for elementary-school kids. The Board of Education in Atlanta, where recess was once eliminated, is now considering a rule that would prohibit teachers from withholding recess from students for disciplinary purposes.

New laws in Florida too are the culmination of a long campaign by parents in the state. One of those parents, Angela Browning, founder of Recess for All Florida Students, said her kids started coming home from school in tears a few years ago, complaining that the day had been too long and that they’d had no time to play with friends. At the time, they were getting 10 minutes of recess twice a week, she said. This year, with 20 minutes of recess each day, their response has been different.

“I cannot even begin to explain to you how much adding recess back into their day— how much of an effect that had on my kids,” she said. “When we have these young children and we can’t find time to give them a 20-minute break a day, we’ve lost our way.”

In the past 20 years, American schools have focused more on testing to show student achievement, which has led leaders in some states and school districts to cut into recess in favor of more in-class instruction. In 2007, the Center on Education Policy at George Washington University found that 20% of school districts had reduced recess time nationwide. Students in the USA today take an average of 112 required tests between pre-kindergarten and 12th grade, according to an analysis by the Council of the Great City Schools in 2015.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that children participate in 60 minutes of “moderate to vigorous activity per day,” and suggested that recess be part of that. “Recess is a necessary break in the day for optimizing a child’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development,” the AAP wrote in a 2013 policy statement. “Recess should be considered a child’s personal time, and it should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons.”

“Quality physical education along with daily recess are necessary components of the school curriculum that enable students to develop physical competence, health-related fitness, self responsibility, and enjoyment of physical activity so that they can be physically active for a lifetime,” the groups wrote in a position paper about elementary school recess in 2001.

A 2009 study found that 8- and 9-year-old children who had at least one daily recess period of more than 15 minutes had better classroom behavior. The study also found that black students and students from low-income families were more likely to be given no recess or minimal recess. That report reinforced the results of a 1998 study, which found that when 43 fourth-grade students were given recess, they worked more or fidgeted less than when they were not given recess.

When recess is eliminated or reduced, it is often because a school is allocating more time to subjects covered on standardized tests, aiming to improve student achievement. But a 2010 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found positive associations between recess and academic performance. “There is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores,” the report said.

Another study, from 2016, found that young boys who spent more time sitting and less time playing didn’t progress as quickly in reading and math.

Studies also show that recess can improve student nutrition when held before lunchtime. A 2014 study published in Preventive Medicine found that holding recess before lunch increased students’ fruit and vegetable consumption by 54%.