

**Physical Activity is Not a Discipline Tool:  
The Case for Recess**

**Why recess?**

Nearly 40 percent of children and adolescents living in the City of Rochester are overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> Active children are more likely to be at a healthy weight, and less likely to develop chronic diseases, like diabetes, later in life. Active children are also more likely to feel good about themselves by supporting their emotional health and reducing feelings of anxiety.<sup>2</sup> Sixty minutes of physical activity per day contributes to the development of strong muscles, bones, vital organ and brain functions in children.<sup>3</sup> Recess can contribute to up to a third of a child's recommended daily activity. The American Academy of Pediatrics believes that recess is a crucial and necessary component of a child's development.<sup>4</sup>

Recess is important. It provides an opportunity for a child to be active, and can help improve student achievement in the classroom.<sup>5</sup> Recess gives children the time to recharge through unstructured play. Research shows us that play throughout the day causes a student's brain to function more efficiently, leading to overall improvements in cognitive control, focus and performance.<sup>6</sup> In fact, eliminating or minimizing the importance of recess can negatively affect academic achievement.



**Why should the denial recess not be used as a punishment tool?**

Children living in urban neighborhoods lack the safe open spaces that encourage exercise. In such cases, the only opportunity for physical activity during the day for these children is during school hours. Fear of crime in urban neighborhoods means that parents are often not comfortable with their children playing outside or in local parks.<sup>7</sup> Students living in neighborhoods with graffiti, low residential stability and low socioeconomic status have higher levels of depression, anxiety and conduct disorders than those from more ordered neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup>

Recess is a valuable tool that can help reduce stress, decrease restlessness and anxiety and teach problem-solving skills. The American Academy of Pediatrics states that recess should never be withheld as a punishment because it serves as a fundamental component of the academic, social and emotional development of a child.<sup>9</sup>

**"If a child is struggling with Math, or Reading.. do we take THAT away from them? No. We teach them and RE-teach them in hopes of their ability to find connections and apply skills to their everyday lives. It's the same thing with Recess." - Playworks**

**Leading National Examples:**

Many states around the country have addressed this issue. In **Iowa**, the state recommends 20 minutes of daily recess, and recommends withholding recess should not be used as a tool for punishment. In **New Mexico**, the state recommends that all districts prohibit withholding physical activity (physical education class, recess) as a means/method of punishment. In **California**, the state encourages all districts to provide daily recess for elementary students, and requires every pupil to leave the room at recess (meaning students cannot be held back in school during recess). **North Carolina's** physical activity policy prohibits taking away structured/unstructured recess or any other form of physical activity time from students as a form of punishment. The policy goes so far as to even prohibit severe physical activity as a punishment tool. Finally, in **Hawaii**, state guidelines prohibit using or withholding physical activity as a form of punishment.

## What is happening in Rochester?

Parents in the Rochester City School District have concerns over children not being allowed to participate in recess as a form of punishment. In 2014, they organized a recess session with the Rochester City School District Parent Advisory Council where Healthi Kids presented on the background and history of recess in the district. Together, we are calling for a district-wide solution that ensures no child will be denied recess.

**"Minimizing or eliminating recess can negatively affect academic achievement, as growing evidence links recess to improved physical health, social skills, and cognitive development" - Academy of Pediatrics**

Studies demonstrate that strengthening district policies is an effective strategy for changing school practices.<sup>10</sup> A strong district policy that recognizes recess should not be used as a punishment tool provides for equal opportunities to all students to have the time for physical activity during the school day.

Strengthening the Rochester City School District disciplinary and wellness policies to include provisions that prohibit teachers from using physical activity as a form of punishment is the best way to ensure all students in Rochester receive physical activity and unstructured play time. By revising district policies to include this provision, the district will provide the opportunity to improve academic performance and achievement, promote healthy behaviors in children that lead to healthy weight and support the social, emotional, and physical health of each child.



## Healthi Kids Recommends:

- **The Rochester City School District amend their Regulations of Intervention and Discipline policy to include a provision that prohibits using or withholding physical activity (recess) as a form of punishment.**
- **Bringing professional development opportunities to the Rochester City School District that highlight the importance of recess, and give teachers the tools and resources they need to implement daily recess activities.**

## Endnotes

1. Cook, S. (2009). Prevalence and trends of severe obesity among US children and adolescents. *Acad Pediatrics*. Sept-Oct: 9(5): 322-329.
2. US Department of Health and Human Services. 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.
3. Clements, R. (2004). An investigation of the status of outdoor play. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. 5(1). Online
4. American Academy of Pediatrics (2012). Policy statement: The crucial role of recess in school. *Pediatrics*. 131(1), January 2013: 182-188.
5. Sattelmair, J. & Ratey, J. (2009). Physically active play and cognition: An academic matter? *Journal of Play*. Winter Ed. p. 365-374.
6. Chaddock, L. et al. (2010). Basal ganglia volume is associated with aerobic fitness in preadolescent children. *Dev Neurosci*. 32(3): 249-256.
7. Perdue, W., Stone, L. & Gostin, L. (2003). The built environment and its relationship to the public's health: The legal framework. *AM J Public Health*. 93(9): 1390-1394.
8. Aneshensel CS, Sucoff CA (1996). The neighborhood context of adolescent mental health. *J Health Soc Behavior*. 37:293-310.
9. American Academy of Pediatrics (2012).
10. Turner et al. (2013). Withholding recess from elementary school students: Policies matter. *J Sch Health*. Aug: 83(8): 533-541.

## About Healthi Kids

*By advocating for a handful of public-policy and practice changes, the Healthi Kids Coalition is blazing a path for healthier, more active children in Rochester and Monroe County, New York. Our change agenda calls for better school food, safer play areas, food standards at childcare centers, at least 60 minutes of in-school physical activity, and policies that support breastfeeding.*

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