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School Recess
Benefits, Obstacles, and Policy

By

Amy McMullan

A capstone thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

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Primary Advisor: Trish Harvey

Content Reviewer: Theresa Moran

Peer Reviewers: McKenzie Lindahl & Emma Musachio

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	3
LIST OF FIGURES.....	4
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	7
Personal Student Experience.....	8
Personal Professional Experience.....	10
Personal Philosophy of Education.....	11
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	14
Background and Definitions.....	14
The Benefits of Recess.....	19
Obstacles for Recess in Elementary Schools.....	36
Current Policy Regarding Recess.....	43
CHAPTER THREE: Research Methods.....	52
Rationale.....	52
Methodology and Scope.....	52
Selecting Setting and Participants.....	53
Timing.....	54
Survey Development.....	55
Survey Return and Potential Complications.....	58
Summary.....	59
CHAPTER FOUR: Results.....	60
Demographics.....	60
Quantitative Data.....	63
Qualitative Data.....	69
Summary.....	73
CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion.....	75
Findings.....	75
Limitations of Research.....	84
Policy Recommendation.....	86
Recommendations for Further Learning and Research.....	87
Dissemination.....	91
Growth of Author.....	92
Final Conclusion.....	92
REFERENCES.....	94
APPENDIX.....	99

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Principal Survey Responses: Please select the option that best describes the region of your school.....	61
Table 2. Principal Survey Responses: How many students attend your school?	62
Table 3. Principal Survey Responses: How many minutes of recess does each grade at your school have daily?	64
Table 4. Principal Survey Responses: Please indicate your opinion on the following statements.....	65
Table 5. Principal Survey Responses: What are the challenges or obstacles that you face when it comes to recess?.....	66
Table 6. Principal Survey Responses: Who supervises recess at your school?.....	67

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Principal Survey Responses: Please select the best option for your opinion on this statement: Recess is a priority at my school.....	63
Figure 2. Principal Survey Responses: Does your school have any policy — formal or informal — regarding recess?.....	68
Figure 3. Principal Survey Responses: Can teachers at your school withhold recess for academic or behavioral reasons?	69

To my teachers: Joan (Preschool), Mrs. Mitch (1st), Mr. Schmitt (2nd), Miss Laravie (3rd), Mrs. Krough (4th), Mrs. Walker-Buchanan (5th), Miss Bingham (6th), Mr. Rafferty (Science), Miss Thompson (FACS), Miss Maxwell (Band), Mr. Hoven (Math), Mrs. Gramith (Civics), Mr. Timmer (Choir), Mrs. Von Ruden (Political Science), Mrs. Swails (English), Mrs. Freeman (History), Frau Moran (German), Professor Chris Gilbert (Political Science), and Professor Kate Knutson (Political Science)

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning.

But for children play is serious learning.

Play is really the work of childhood.”

— Fred Rogers

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

If you ask a young child what they love most about school, you will get a variety of responses. Some students will talk about their teacher, or friends and classmates. Other students might describe a passion for a specific subject — mathematics, science, or art class. You may also hear about a project they recently completed or a significant accomplishment; winning a chess tournament, participating in a school play or talent show, or mastering a multiplication unit. However, when you engage a young child in a conversation about school, at some point, it is likely to hear that they look forward to recess. One may wonder why recess is so beloved by children, when at the surface it seems so simplistic, just kids running around and playing. But upon deeper consideration, there are many reasons young children love recess. Unlike the majority of the school day, recess is their own time, essentially free to use as they wish. To be at the very root of who they are — just a child at play, exactly as children are developmentally supposed to be. This short block of time is often an important highlight for children, but sometimes adults — educators, parents, and community members — fail to give it proper credit for all that it does for the child.

As we dissect this important topic in this capstone thesis, we will examine three critical questions regarding school recess. First, we will review and consider: *What are the benefits to students in school recess breaks?* Next, we will shift focus and examine the difficulties in implementation of recess, and ask: *What are the obstacles or challenges schools face with recess?* Finally, we will consider both of these previous questions and

examine how policy is being created on every level, from individual schools to the federal level. We will inquire: *What is current policy regarding school recess?* This capstone begins with a literature review of meaningful academic work. Then, it progresses into examining an original survey with regards to school recess and the research questions, and analyzing and evaluating the data collected from the survey.

Personal Student Experience

As a young child, I attended a very small parochial school in Minnesota. There were approximately twelve or thirteen children in my grade each year from Kindergarten until I moved away after the sixth grade. Resources were often depleted and we students felt it, using outdated textbooks and technology. Students in Kindergarten, first, and second grade spent their recess on the “little playground,” which was adjacent to the school. There was a small, fairly old playset with three swings and a slide. On the property, there was a massive oak tree, next to a small hill. We were supplied with a few jump ropes and a couple of balls as well. Each year when the snow fell, some cheap sleds magically appeared. Once something broke or went missing, it was not replaced until the next year. During the winter months, all students dressed up in snow pants, boots, puffy coats, hats, and mittens for the cold. The snow gave us something else to do — another medium to play with. The rules were strict and we could not throw snowballs, but we could make snow forts or other structures with the snow, which was always entertaining. When we “graduated” to the “big playground” in third grade, I looked back and realized how much we actually lost. The “big playground” was actually the church’s parking lot. It had one basketball hoop, and we were given just two rubber kick balls, and one

basketball each year. Some parent or grandparent had painted lines for the basketball court and the kickball field on the pavement many years ago. Again, we had a couple cheap jump ropes and “sleds” to supplement our play. Once the kickballs popped each year, we were done unless someone could convince a parent to buy another for us. Most days, the girls just stood to the side and talked, as we did not feel there was anything to do. In retrospect, this was normal development for young girls, but it was also in part because we were lacking opportunities. Some students would even try to get into trouble with a teacher, so they would lose their recess “privileges.” However, it took quite a bit to lose recess because it was also the teacher’s only time alone. As a small school, they did not get a prep hour. I recall a couple of years where one of the parish’s nuns taught music class, but art and physical education instruction were left to the teachers to implement at their discretion. For the teachers, recess was their only opportunity for a break — it seemed less about the students. Looking back, I can understand why my teachers were so reluctant to take away our recess time for punishment. This time was also a mental health break for them, a time to check in with other teachers, a few minutes to prepare for the remainder of the day. When we lost our recess privilege, they lost out as well. Lunch and recess were supervised by a couple of mothers who did not work outside the home, and on the “big playground” by an incredibly kind, retired grandfather, who would occasionally bring a roll of Lifesavers or mints as treats for us. But as children, we did not know anything different. This was our normal, so we did not see this as a lost or under-utilized opportunity.

Personal Professional Experience

As I was attending class and working towards my teaching license, I would drive past many elementary schools and see these beautiful playgrounds — so much more than anything I had as a young student. The playgrounds felt inviting and colorful. There were multiple options and activities for students of all ages. But, while the playgrounds seemed inviting and exciting, when I began to work inside the schools, I encountered a different problem I had not previously expected.

When I began substitute teaching in various elementary schools, almost twenty years after being a student myself, I realized that recess was viewed differently than I had anticipated. I envisioned children playing, running, and laughing outside on the brightly colored playgrounds I saw, engaging with their peers. But in my experience, some other educators saw it much differently. Recess was clearly a reward or bargaining chip with students, and could be given or taken away for misbehavior or academic reasons. A few classrooms I worked in, the teacher noted that if the students were behaving and completing their work, I could let them out for recess five minutes early as a “reward.” Consequently, some of the same teachers and others, would say that if a student or the classroom was misbehaving or had not completed expected work, I should take away minutes from recess or make them miss recess altogether. As a student who had recess every day, I was shocked that recess had become a form of currency for behavior and completing work.

In one third grade classroom I worked in, the teacher left instructions for who to keep in and what work they needed to complete during recess. When I read off the names

of the students and passed out their work as left by the classroom teacher, I realized more than half of the class was staying in to work during their scheduled recess time. These eight- or nine-year-olds were not getting outside for their recess with their friends. They were expected to continue working, after already sitting still in their chairs and trying to focus for more than two hours. I noticed the work they were doing was mostly math worksheets or spelling activities, which seemed repetitive in comparison to the work we had completed during class time. It seemed so silly to me. In this instance, it was not a student or two who were absent the day before and had to make up a missed assignment or assessment. It was the majority of the class, doing what seemed like unimportant or additional busywork. While I acknowledge I did not have all of the information, I wondered what the teacher was thinking and accomplishing in this situation. I also began to question my values and beliefs in the educational system, and my role as a teacher.

Personal Philosophy of Education

I fully believe that the school system cannot solve every problem, and is not the main entity responsible for raising a child or our country's children. However, we must acknowledge that we are a large, systemic part in the development of children, and with that comes great responsibility. In my opinion, the education system is intended to partner with parents and other stakeholders to take the next generation and raise them to be responsible, productive, intelligent, healthy, kind, caring adults, and who are ready to be leaders, thinkers, and problem-solvers. The administrators and teachers need to think beyond academics and consider what is in the best interest of the whole-child, including mentally, socially, and physically. Everyone, including students, need a healthy balance.

In my opinion and in the opinions of others, we cannot center everything we do on STEM (Ossola, 2014). We need to engage all parts of the person and brain. It is no secret that we are all short on time. In fact, some would argue that time is the most valuable resource, as it is a universally limited resource. In my own life, there is constant competition for time, but it is my responsibility to analyze and prioritize, decide what is most important and necessary, and what I cannot complete. As teachers and educators, we need to help children who cannot make these same decisions for themselves yet, and analyze what is most important for them — and we need to recognize that academics does not always win.

From my perspective, schooltime recess has many benefits and should not be a bargaining chip we use with our students for behavior or completing classwork, as it is simply punishment and not necessarily a logical consequence. Recess is not just a break for the teacher — it is and should be about the student. During recess, students are outside and taking a mental break, and that is a major benefit for their academic development, as well as their mental health (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2013; Pellegrini & Bjorkland, 1997). Teaching students that taking care of their mental health is more important than ever before, as we are seeing increases in depression and anxiety in our students and the general population. Also, students are interacting with each other and making friends, building their social interaction skills, which is a necessary life skill (AAP, 2013). These children are playing, getting their heart rates up, and engaging in physical activity. We are facing a pediatric obesity epidemic, and taking away physical activity in the form of recess as a punishment is unhealthy (Centers for

Disease Control [CDC], 2021; AAP, 2013). Finally, as recess is unstructured and free play, children are engaging with their imagination and natural curiosity. In school, we teach them what to think, and even how to think. Letting them be their own naturally curious, imaginative self for a half-hour during the day should be celebrated, not discouraged for any reason.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter will review the academic literature regarding school recess and focus on information which will help answer the three research questions: 1) *What are the benefits to students in school recess breaks?* 2) *What are the obstacles or challenges schools face with recess?* And 3) *What is current policy regarding school recess?* Following a brief introduction on the topic of school recess, Chapter Two will then consider the myriad of benefits of a recess break for children at school, including academic or cognitive benefits, behavioral benefits evidenced by reputable research studies, health benefits including opinions from national health organizations, and finally social and emotional benefits. Next, the obstacles for recess are reviewed and addressed, primarily academic and classroom needs, as well as increased testing demands, in addition to reported obstacles that are faced on the playground including supervision and bullying. Finally, this chapter concludes by discussing current policy that addresses recess, including where policy is most commonly made, regulations in place or absent regarding recess, and policies as to a teacher or administrator's ability to withhold recess from a student for academic or behavioral reasons.

Background and Definitions

In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stated: "The child shall have full opportunity to play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavor to promote the enjoyment of this right" (Art. 31, as cited in Ramstetter, Murray & Garner, 2010, p.

519). While to some, recess may seem overly simplistic and even unnecessary — it is nothing more than children playing — and one could certainly argue there are better educational ways to use time allotted for a recess break, its importance is much greater and deeper.

Definition of Recess

What exactly is recess? The term “recess” itself refers to a break, and is a regularly scheduled block of time, during the elementary school day for children to play, typically outside. It is comparable to adult-world recesses including court recesses and congressional recesses (Jarrett et al., 2001; Pellegrini, 2008). As adults, we have our own forms of “recess,” but we often call them something else — for instance, a coffee break at work, or exercising at the gym with friends (Jarrett et al., 2001; Pellegrini, 2008). A school recess, defined by both the American Academy of Pediatrics and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is “regularly scheduled periods within the elementary school day for unstructured physical activity and play” (AAP, 2013, p. 183). The Policy Statement went on to state how recess provides students the opportunity to “rest, play, imagine, think, move, and socialize” (AAP, 2013, p. 183). In addition, after recess “students are more attentive and better able to perform cognitively,” and recess breaks “helps young children to develop social skills that are otherwise not acquired in the more structured classroom environment” (AAP, 2013, p. 183). In general, recess is also a time of day in which children have choice and exercise personal autonomy (Public Health Law Center [PHLC], 2013), whereas most of the school day is scheduled and directed. Although the duration of recess may vary from school-to-school, and educational

professionals may disagree on how much time is necessary for recess, according to Waite-Stupiansky and Findlay (2001), the amount of recess can range from 20 minutes to as much as 90 minutes dispersed throughout the day. Additionally, they noted: “A key component of recess is that it is unstructured and undirected. Children are allowed to choose their activities, activity levels, and degree of socializing” (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001, p. 16). It is also important to acknowledge that recess is typically for children in preschool and elementary school; one should note that “recess periods tend not to exist in schools for adolescents, such as junior high schools and high schools” (Pellegrini & Smith, 1993, p. 51). Finally, while recess breaks are not unique to the United States and are utilized in various forms in schools in many other countries, this paper will focus on the current benefits and policies with regards to recess in the United States.

What then, is recess *not*? If recess is about getting children a break from their classroom and out of their chair for more physical activity, some have argued — and some schools have implemented — doing away with recess and replacing recess with physical education. However, both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Council on Physical Education for Children, do not support this view (AAP, 2013; Pellegrini, 2008). Physical education is not a break and should not be a substitute for recess. “In 2001, the Council on Physical Education for Children...denounced the idea of replacing recess with physical education, although the Council had a vested interest in promoting physical education” (as cited in Pellegrini, 2008, p. 183). In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) added, “Recess is a compliment to, but not a replacement

for, physical education. Physical education is an academic discipline. Whereas both have the potential to promote activity and a healthy lifestyle, only recess (particularly unstructured recess) provides the creative, social, and emotional benefits of play” (p. 186).

In addition to physical education, most in the education field also believe recess must be unstructured, meaning that students direct and choose their activities and level of socialization (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001). Recently, some organizations and educational professionals are beginning to debate the idea of structured recess versus unstructured recess. When recess is unstructured, there are still the components of adult supervision, safety, and opportunities for physical activity, but the main difference is in that students exercise complete autonomy in deciding how they would like to spend their time, and how much socialization they would like. In essence, the key difference comes down to: are children being directed with games, or are they creating and choosing them on their own?

Structured recess is a recess based on structured play, where games and physical activities are taught and led by a trained adult (teachers, school staff, or volunteers). Proponents for structured recess note that children often need help in developing games and require suggestions and encouragement to participate in physical activities. (Ramstetter, Murray & Garner, 2010, p. 522)

While there may be some benefits to a structured recess, many feel that the very nature of recess is that it is a time for children to take a break, and provide them with a choice of

how to spend their time. Therefore, the idea of a structured form of recess would contradict the purpose of recess. Proponents of structured recess have also argued that conflict resolution skills are practiced and taught on the playground with adult supervision, whereas in an unstructured recess, children learn to manage and resolve disagreements on their own terms (Ramstetter, Murray & Garner, 2010). Still, “some schools also provide structured supervision during recess to increase physical activity levels by teaching children new games and encouraging every child to participate” (PHLC, 2013, “What is recess?”). As this is an emerging area with a very different approach to recess, this capstone and literature review focuses on unstructured recess instead.

History of Recess

No sources detail the historical context and development of school recess. Pellegrini (2005) noted that he was “amazed to find virtually nothing written about the historical origins of recess in American schools” (p. 23). In his efforts to understand the emergence of school recess, Pellegrini briefly reviewed photos of schools from the early 1900s that did not have playgrounds attached, and discussed how psychology has evolved regarding the importance of play (2005). Unfortunately, there seems to be no clear evidence on when or why recess began in schools. However, it would likely be foolish to definitively state that due to lack of photo evidence of a swingset or children playing outside at school, that students did not have a recess break. Unfortunately, it seems as if this part of history has not been archived, and no firm conclusions can be made regarding the emergence of recess in elementary schools.

The Benefits of Recess

There are numerous, maybe countless benefits to school recess for children. Generally, they can be divided into four main categories: academic and cognitive benefits, behavioral benefits, physical and health benefits, and social and emotional benefits. This section will discuss some of the main benefits of each.

Academic and Cognitive Benefits

The brain is arguably the most complex system in the body. While scientists have come to know so many aspects and facets of the brain and how it works, so much of it remains a mystery to even the brightest of minds. This leads one to the question of: what do we know about the developing brain of a child, how a child processes new information and learns, and is recess then beneficial?

With certainty, we know that a young child's brain is different from even an older child's brain or that of an adult's (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1997). As such, young children think and process information differently (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1997). The term "cognitive immaturity" is discussed by psychologists Pellegrini and Bjorklund (1997) regarding the difference in children's brains, as compared to adults'. In doing so, it is acknowledged that children are not capable of high-level processing, concentration, and other neurological functions that are expected of an adult or even an older child, and as an education community, we agree to meet children where they are developmentally.

Additionally, Pellegrini and Bjorklund (1997) discussed the concept of "distributed effort" (or "distributed practice"), stating:

Because of the cognitive immaturity of young children and benefits of distributed effort, we propose that maximum attention to school tasks is attained when children's efforts on tasks are distributed. Recess, and other forms of spacing, such as short work periods and frequent task changes, may serve that purpose ... we propose that recess may play a critical role in fostering attentional skills in children. (p. 37)

Pellegrini continued to cite research dating back over a century "that children learn better and more quickly when their efforts towards a task are distributed rather than concentrated or when they are given breaks during tasks" (as cited in Pellegrini, 2008, p. 188). Logically, even in the adult world this theory of distributed practice makes sense. Two students may take the same course in college. One student studies a smaller amount, throughout the semester, while the other student tries to "cram" in a short period prior to the final exam. Most often, the student who "crams" does not do as well on the test, and more importantly, does not recall the information later. Likewise, Pellegrini and Bjorklund (1997) questioned the role or absence of distributed practice in elementary schools, stating "Given the positive effects of distributed practice on children's attention to school tasks, it is quite puzzling why it has not been more readily used in classrooms" (p. 36).

To frame it simply, we all need breaks in our day. We are more productive and able to focus when given breaks, and children are no exception to this. Pellegrini (2008) explained the necessity for recess breaks from a cognitive standpoint, very plainly: "After a reasonable amount of work, you need a break, if for no other reason than it may help

you be more productive” (p. 182). In the adult world, there are laws that require breaks, as they increase productivity and safety. For example, there are laws regarding how long commercial truckers can drive without stopping for a break. Pellegrini (2008) even posed it to the everyday driver, who has taken a longer trip, arguing that when you pull over for a break, you feel better and also safer afterward.

Likewise, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) agreed with this theory of distributed practice, and stated: “Optimal cognitive processing in a child necessitates a period of interruption after a period of concentrated instruction. Several studies demonstrated that recess, whether performed indoors or outdoors, made children more attentive and more productive in the classroom” (p. 184). Waite-Stupiansky and Findlay (2001) took this argument one step further and asserted that “constant attention is counterproductive to learning” (p. 18). Breaks like recess breaks are essential to academic learning and higher cognitive function. In the absence of breaks, information cannot be processed as effectively or recalled, especially by younger students. Therefore, we can conclude that recess breaks create opportunities for better academic learning and cognitive processing required for higher performance in the classroom.

The psychological theories of cognitive immaturity and distributed practice are corroborated by a research study conducted by Brez and Sheets (2017). In this study, data was collected before and after a recess break on 99 children in grades three through five, in two school districts. The focus of this study was sustained attention and creativity. To measure sustained attention, students were given a reading passage, and asked to cross out every letter ‘e’ while reading, and maintain a focus for comprehension, as the

students were told there would be a question to test comprehension at the end of the passage. There was no time limit for this activity. To measure each student's creativity, they were provided with an ordinary object — either a spoon or paperclip — and asked to provide a list of alternative uses for the object. Students were given three minutes to list as many unique alternative uses. Finally, both students and teachers provided responses to a questionnaire. Students were asked three questions regarding their recess time: 1. Where they played on the playground during recess; 2. Who they played with during recess; and 3. To rate their physical activity level during recess on a scale of 1 to 5. Teachers also answered questions regarding each student. They reported on each child's gender, conscientiousness, creativity, and extraversion. Brez and Sheets (2017) concluded that there was an increase in sustained attention following a recess break based on their pre-recess and post-recess reading activities.

It is also imperative to note that there is a connection between physical activity or movement and brain cognition. That is, movement facilitates improved processes in the brain that are critical to learning. Waite-Stupiansky and Findlay (2001) summarized this by stating that:

Physical exercise, including recess, actually enhances brain function. In addition, breaks in structured learning activities help humans learn better. Students who spend more of their school day engaging in physical activity (recess and physical education class) perform better academically than those who spend more time in instruction. (p. 23)

Waite-Stupiansky and Findlay (2001) continued to provide examples and cited several research studies regarding the brain, cognition, and its link to physical activity. One such example is a 1995 study that “suggests that people of all ages benefit mentally through motor stimulation” (Brink; as cited in Waite-Stupiansky and Findlay, 2001, p. 17).

Another example provided, shows that “the cerebellum, the area associated with movement, has been found to be a ‘virtual switchboard for cognitive activity’” (Jensen; as cited in Waite-Stupiansky and Findlay, 2001, p. 17).

Considering proven science about the developing brain — children’s cognitive immaturity due to their brain development, distributed practice being an effective means for learning and retaining new information, and the link between cognition and physical activity — one may conclude that recess is not just a good idea, but essential to an elementary school curriculum, as well as necessary for greater academic achievement and learning. In the greater recess debate, “if recess does indeed interfere with children’s learning, then it should be minimized. Correspondingly, if it facilitates learning and achievement, it should be supported and possibly expanded” (Pellegrini, 2005, p. 141). It seems that principals agree that recess is academically beneficial. In a nationwide survey of 2009 Gallup survey of 1,951 elementary school principals, over 80 percent of principals reported that they believe recess has a positive impact on student academics (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [RWJF], 2010). Based on the research presented, one may conclude that recess has a significant impact on cognitive development and academics for young children.

Behavioral Benefits

Most teachers and education professionals would state that providing a recess break improves student behavior in the classroom. In fact, two out of three principals believe that students listen better and are better able to focus, following recess (RWJF, 2010). But is this actually true, or is this simply anecdotal? Fortunately, there have been several studies regarding recess and behavior that can answer this question with relative authority. For the purposes of this paper, four significant studies will be discussed.

The first significant research study regarding recess and how it impacts behavior inside the classroom was conducted by Pellegrini and Davis and published in 1993. Their objectives were to consider recess and its timing on pre- and post- recess behavior in the classroom. The observational study utilized a classroom consisting of twenty-three children (fourteen boys and nine girls) over a period of fourteen weeks. The authors noted that the mean age of the children participating was 9.4 years old. A classroom schedule was followed each day, providing for recess at either 10:30 a.m. or 11:00 a.m., which is noted as 2.5 or 3 hours of “confinement” by the authors of the study. Each recess period lasted 30 minutes. Daily observations were recorded prior to recess in the classroom, during the recess period outside, and following recess in the classroom. For 30 minutes prior to recess, all students were given the same, “standardised seat work” to complete. When in the classroom, both before and after recess, the students were observed for “fidget” and concentration. “Fidget” was recorded on a scale of 1 to 7, with one meaning no fidget observed, and seven meaning high fidget observed. For concentration, again scored 1 to 7, with one equaling low concentration and 7 equaling

high concentration (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993, p. 90). During recess, six behaviors were recorded for all children: “non-social exercise, social exercise, vigor of exercise, non-social sedentary, social sedentary, and duration interval” (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993, p. 91). The observers were trained, and “discussed areas of agreement and disagreement,” and had “reliability checks” to ensure the validity of the recorded observations (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993, p. 91). The authors also note that there were three observers and not all were aware of the hypotheses, to control and eliminate bias. Pellegrini and Davis (1993) found that prior to recess, children, especially boys, got more restless as more time passed, or as the length of the “confinement” increased. In addition, they found that fidgeting increased with “confinement time” and concentration decreased. However, this study found that after recess, children who were more physically active during recess are less attentive following recess, than children who are more social and sedentary during recess (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993). Finally, Pellegrini and Davis (1993) found that more social sedentary recess correlates to higher concentration and less fidgeting in the classroom, after the recess break. Thus, from this study, one may conclude that even students who are not physically active benefit from recess, as they are better able to concentrate and have been shown to fidget less, following a recess break.

In a second research study, Pellegrini and co-researchers Davis Huberty and Jones (1995) considered the timing of recess on students' behavior. In this study, they varied the timing of recess by increments of thirty minutes in classrooms of students in Kindergarten, second grade, and fourth grade, and observed behaviors before, during, and after recess breaks (Pellegrini, Davis Huberty & Jones, 1995). They found that inattention

was higher before recess than after, and “prerecess inattention varied as a function of deprivation duration,” meaning the longer the students had to wait for their recess break, the more inattentive they became (Pellegrini, Davis Huberty & Jones, 1995, p. 845). From this study, we can conclude that recess helps students be more attentive in the classroom.

Is there a difference in behavior for students who are not normally given recess, and then are given a recess break? A research team interested in this question created a study in a school where children did not normally have recess (Jarrett et al., 2001). They examined two fourth-grade classes, equaling 43 children. This study included five students with attention deficit disorder (ADD). Children were observed over a period of five months, giving them recess one day for 15-20 minutes, and not on another day. The students were not aware in advance of the schedule or if they would or would not be given recess. On all observation days, there was no physical education class. The researchers observed students for on-task work, “fidgety” defined as “excessive movement, tapping, arm or leg swinging, and being partly out of chair,” in addition to “listless behavior” (Jarrett et al., 2001, p. 123). They found that after students had recess, on-task work was increased, and fidgety behavior decreased — however listless behavior was low and generally stable on both non-recess and recess days (Jarrett et al., 2001). Also worth noting, all students with ADD benefited from recess either by being more on task, less fidgety, or both. As such, from this study, one could conclude that providing students with even a short recess break of 15 to 20 minutes increases on task behavior and reduces “fidgety” behaviors, and is especially beneficial for students with ADD.

The final research study with regards to recess and its effect on behavior was published in 2009 by Barros, Silver and Stein. The objective was to collect and examine data on “the amount of recess that children 8 to 9 years of age receive in the United States and compares the group classroom behavior of children receiving recess daily with that of children not receiving recess daily” (Barros, Silver & Stein, 2009, p. 431). This was done through questionnaires completed by school administrators, teachers, and parents during the 2001-2002 school year. The parent questionnaire asked for demographic information including gender and ethnicity, annual household income, and parental education. School administrators were asked to provide information regarding the school’s characteristics such as the location, region, and type of school (public or private). The teachers were asked to answer questions regarding several aspects of their classroom and school, including the frequency and duration of recess — classified as either “none/minimal,” or “having ≥ 1 daily recess period of >15 minutes in length” (Barros, Silver & Stein, 2009, p. 432). Additionally, teachers were asked to respond with regards to their school’s physical education program and its frequency, as well as the number of students in the classroom, classroom academic level, proportion of boys to girls, proportion of minorities, and the proportion of students eligible for free lunch (Barros, Silver & Stein, 2009, p. 432). Finally, teachers were also asked to provide a rating of classroom behavior, which was assessed using the “teacher’s rating of classroom behavior (TRCB)” on a scale of 1 to 5 (Barros, Silver & Stein, 2009, p. 433). The scale was presented to the teachers as “1, misbehaves very frequently and is almost always difficult to handle; 2, misbehaves frequently and is often difficult to handle; 3,

misbehaves occasionally; 4, behaves well; 5, behaves exceptionally well” (Barros, Silver & Stein, 2009, p. 433). Data was analyzed on over 10,000 children and an equal number of boys and girls. It was found that 30% of the children had fifteen minutes or less of recess per day. TRCB scores were higher/better when children were given >15 minutes of recess per day, meaning that teachers reported better behavior in classrooms with recess daily. From this study, one can conclude that, among 8 and 9-year-olds, having one or more breaks lasting more than 15 minutes was associated with better classroom behavior.

From these four studies, which utilize different research methods and different sample sizes, it is generally believed that elementary students are less “fidgety,” and are better able to concentrate when they are provided a recess break. In addition, teachers notice an overall difference in classroom behavior when recess is provided to young students.

Health Benefits

Our society has become increasingly concerned and aware of pediatric health issues, including but certainly not limited to childhood obesity and juvenile diabetes. As a result, communities are turning to schools to be a greater part of the solution to these health problems. It is no secret though, that children are spending more time in sedentary activities or involved in different forms of “screen time.” It was noted that even thirty years ago, it was found that “instead of playing outside, children spend a significant amount of their day in front of video screens” (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001, p. 19). One can easily hypothesize that children’s amount of screen time has only increased in recent years with substantial technological advances and the implementation of

technology in the classroom. For schools to nurture the whole child and provide for healthy opportunities to students, physical activity absolutely must be part of the equation (AAP, 2013).

The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified childhood obesity as a serious problem noting that 1 in 5 children are considered obese (CDC, 2021; AAP, 2013). In addition, the CDC noted that childhood obesity disproportionately affects ethnic minorities and those in lower socioeconomic classes, meaning that Hispanics, non-Hispanic blacks, and children raised in lower income households are more likely to be obese (2021).

The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly argued that school recess breaks for elementary school children provide some benefit to this challenging problem (2013). During the school day, children are mostly sedentary, and even some movement during a recess period can be beneficial for a child's health. Even though not all children may be physically active during recess, it does provide an opportunity for children who choose to be active. The CDC recommended that children engage in 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day (as cited in AAP, 2013). "Recess can serve as a counterbalance to sedentary time and contribute to the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day, a standard strongly supported by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) policy as a means to lessen risk of overweight" (AAP, 2013, p. 184).

Also important to note, in most schools, elementary students do not receive daily physical education class. Therefore, when recess is decreased or eliminated, so is the

opportunity for daily physical activity at school. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2007) found that “recess offers nearly half (42%) 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” (p. 6).

While it might be easy to think of a school’s primary role as to provide education, it is important to remember that teachers and administrators are preparing their students for outside the classroom walls. Young children learn lifelong habits, which includes components such as healthy eating and exercise. “Active children usually grow up to be active adults” and research proves that children who develop unhealthy habits and tendencies usually maintain those in adulthood (Barros, Silver & Stein, 2009, p. 431).

One might wonder: what does this mean, and why does this matter to an educator or a school? The fact is, decisions made by a school regarding health — to promote healthy choices or not to prioritize health — can have long-term effects and greatly influence or disrupt a community. Inactive or sedentary children face a number of health issues; they weigh more, have higher blood pressure, and higher cholesterol than more active children (American Heart Association, as cited in Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001). On the other hand, “regular physical activity has also been correlated with higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety in adolescents” (CDC, as cited in Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001, p. 20).

There are stark consequences attributed to lack of physical activity in children, and significant reasons supporting the physical benefits of recess. Recess clearly provides a necessary outlet for many children during the school day to not just take a mental break

from classroom work, but to engage in necessary physical exercise. As schools have a powerful role in shaping the minds and behaviors of young children, they must acknowledge their responsibility in shaping the whole child, by communicating and modeling that maintaining a healthy lifestyle is important.

Social and Emotional Benefits

One might argue that a school's role is to teach. While that may be a primary goal and responsibility, to ignore other roles a school plays in the development of a child would be foolish. If it is believed that the school plays a role greater than simply educating the child, and is at least partially responsible for the development of the whole child, educators must recognize the benefits and goals beyond academic development. Previously, this chapter has examined how school recess provides benefits to academic and cognitive development, as well as behavioral benefits, all of which can be seen as significant benefits in meeting learning goals that would be of obvious interest to a school. This chapter has also discussed how a recess break provides necessary health benefits, which also lends to the idea that schools play a role in developing the whole child, not just the academic mind. In this section, we will consider how a recess break provides vital opportunities for a child to develop socially and emotionally.

While one could argue that as a school's primary goal is to teach students, one might also contend that an organization such as the American Academy of Pediatrics should solely be focused on children's health. But this is simply not the case. The AAP (2013) asserted that: "Recess promotes social and emotional learning and development for children by offering them a time to engage in peer interactions in which they practice

and role play essential social skills” (p. 184). The AAP (2013) continued, citing that children practice communication skills such as negotiation, cooperation, sharing, and problem solving, in addition to developing coping skills including perseverance and self-control. Further, the AAP (2013) argued that a school recess break “offers a child a necessary, socially structured means for managing stress” (p. 184).

Statistically, it seems that there is practically no disagreement regarding the social and emotional benefits of recess. In a 2009 nationwide survey of almost 2,000 elementary school principals, 96% believed that “recess has a positive impact on social development” (RWJF, 2010, p. 7).

It seems then that the American Academy of Pediatrics, elementary school principals, and even government officials are recognizing the importance of social and emotional development. Educational psychologists Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) provided British Columbia, Canada as an example. The public school system in the province of British Columbia named “Social Responsibility” as a “foundational skill” in their curriculum and standards, and it is now considered the “Fourth R,” along with reading, writing, and mathematics (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005, p. 16).

Through observations and anecdotes, several authors discuss the extensive social and emotional benefits of recess as well. Recess gives children an opportunity to — on their own terms — build friendships and learn to get along with others. Children also practice and learn conflict resolution skills, build leadership abilities, learn early negotiation skills, and develop communication skills and strategies. When given the opportunity, students practice and learn to resolve conflicts during recess, often without

adults dictating or resolving it for them. As discussed by Waite-Stupiansky and Findlay (2001), “The social benefits of recess are also noteworthy. Students learn how to build relationships, resolve and avoid conflicts, and see others’ points of view. They direct their own activities, providing important relief from stress while promoting positive self esteem and a positive attitude toward school” (p. 23). Quite simply, those are all important goals in child development, and it would be difficult to argue against any of these pursuits. Educators, parents, and other stakeholders are all hoping to instill in children better conflict resolution skills, greater relationship skills, more self esteem, and a more positive attitude towards school and education. In addition, “in organizing their own games, children learn respect for rules and self-discipline. They also learn to control aggression, develop essential problem-solving skills, practice leadership, and resolve conflicts” (Jarrett & Maxwell, 2000; as cited in Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001, p. 20). Educational psychologist Pellegrini who has been cited several times concurs. Pellegrini (2008) noted that recess builds:

...some pretty sophisticated skills. For example, to play cooperatively with their peers, children have to be able and willing to see things from the perspectives of their peers, use compromise to resolve conflicts, follow the rules of play and games, and use language to negotiate all of this. (p. 185)

The complexity of these social interactions and emotional development, beginning for some children in preschool even, is astonishing. When we consider the age of the children and the myriad of skills they are practicing on a playground, it is far more complex than we often give them credit for.

One might ask: how does the social and emotional development of a child, grounded in recess, really make a difference? There are multiple theories, where social and emotional development makes a major impact on a child's life. First, Waite-Stupiansky and Findlay (2001) presented a hypothesis, concluding that "It is possible that students who have the opportunity to develop strong conflict-resolution skills in elementary school may engage in fewer violent conflicts in the higher grades and adulthood" (pp. 20-21). While untested, this hypothesis logically makes sense. Stronger conflict-resolution skills, more developed communication skills, negotiation skills, stronger relationships, a better attitude towards school — students with these attributes would likely be more successful in life and less violent.

Another idea is presented by Pellegrini and Bohn (2005), who asserted that "the social exchanges between peers that typify most recess periods are especially important to primary school children's cognitive performance and more general adjustment to school" (p. 14). Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) further argued that the social skills and friendships built during recess, propel young students to feel more academically confident and less stressed. This ties into attitudes towards school, friendships, and self esteem. They continue, noting a strong, positive correlation between academic achievement and students who interact with peers during unstructured periods (such as lunch and recess), as opposed to students who are more anti-social or interact primarily with adults (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). It is typical that students who have stronger friendships and greater self-esteem are going to have a more positive attitude toward going to school. Conversely, students who lack friends and have poor self-esteem, would

tend to have a more negative outlook on school. Furthermore, it would be likely or understandable that there would be at least some correlation between a student's attitude about school and academic achievement. A Stanford University study examined low-income elementary schools and their recess programs, finding that "high quality recess can positively contribute to a school's climate" in the areas of conflict-resolution skills and teamwork, as well as attitudes, attendance and achievement (Parker, 2015, "Improved Attitudes").

Finally, two sources noted an important connection regarding recess and development that has yet to be discussed: imagination and creativity. In school, while teachers may try to encourage inquiry, curiosity, or imagination, the reality is, the often structured nature of school can be limiting to young children. But during recess, when given the freedom to play and be silly, children's imagination and creativity can thrive. As Mottweiler and Taylor (2014) found, put quite simply, "Children also show improved imagination and creativity when given opportunities to engage in play" (as cited in Brez & Sheets, 2017, p. 434). Another stated, "Research has shown that, through outdoor play, children develop social and emotional skills; increased imagination and creativity; and increased discovery, reasoning, and manipulative skills" (Rogers & Sawyers, 1998, as cited in Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001, p. 20). It is important that we teach not just the standards and curriculum provided, but that we teach the student as a whole child, and recognize our part in providing for their development into a successful human. A recess break provides an opportunity for young students to grow emotionally and practice social

skills that are necessary for development. These benefits should not be minimized or overlooked.

Obstacles for Recess in Elementary Schools

As has been discussed, recess provides numerous benefits to young students, including academic benefits, benefits to classroom student behavior, physical or health benefits for children, in addition to social and emotional benefits. Further, these benefits are supported by multiple, substantial research studies and articles. National surveys of elementary school principals corroborate that these benefits are recognized by the leaders of elementary school communities (RWJF, 2010). As the benefits are apparent, one might wonder what the opposition is. Why would an elementary school not provide students with a recess break? This connects with the second research question: *What are the obstacles for schools regarding recess?*

Quite simply, arguments against recess can be broken down into two categories. The argument of time and competing academic needs a school must meet are examined. Another argument is the issues of safety, supervision, and bullying.

As we review and consider all arguments, it is important to understand that this subject is a complicated matter with multiple perspectives. Therefore, when referring to these positions as “opposition,” or refer to individuals that hold these beliefs as “opponents,” this does not necessarily mean they are completely against recess. Certainly, in some cases, opponents are against recess time for elementary school students entirely. However, in other cases, there are competing priorities such as academic performance,

safety issues, or other factors that lead to valid concerns. Therefore, these individuals are not “against” recess, they may just find legitimate challenges with implementation.

Pellegrini (2008) summarized these two arguments against recess that he has encountered throughout his work and study regarding the subject of recess:

This rather simple but powerful and widely understood benefit of breaks has not deterred a group, generally composed of school administrators, from reducing recess time or eliminating recess all together [sic] from the school day. The reasons these “no nonsense” school superintendents and principals, as well as many politicians, most often give are twofold. First, they claim that recess is a waste of valuable time that could be more profitably used for instruction. Second, they claim that during recess kids get bullied and that on the playground they learn aggression. (p. 182)

Recess and Instructional Time

When considering the debate over recess, opponents often bring in a larger debate in the education field. In the past two decades, and specifically since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted as federal law in 2002, there has been a much greater emphasis on standardized testing, leading to more pressure for in-class instruction (Reilly, 2017). In addition, the adoption of the Common Core Standards has only added to this stress (Reilly, 2017). After the implementation of NCLB, teachers and administrators felt tremendous pressure to perform academically, and as a result schools “began to squeeze as much instruction into the day as possible” (Adams, n.d., para. 4). Any educator in the United States would likely agree that academic pressure and pressure

to perform in standardized testing impacts instructional decisions. There are countless forms of alternative assessments that could measure student achievement and whether a student has met a given standard, but testing remains a key indicator in our current educational system. In fact, “students today take an average of 112 mandated standardized tests between pre-kindergarten and 12th grade” (Reilly, 2017, “The debate over recess”). That averages out to approximately eight mandated standardized tests per year, or about one per month, each school year. It is important to note that this figure only includes mandated standardized tests, not other classroom assessments given by teachers or dictated by curriculum.

Elementary school principals clearly feel this pressure to perform due to increased testing requirements as well, and in some schools, this has a direct effect on recess. In a nationwide survey, one out of five principals reported that testing requirements have led to a decrease in recess time at their school (RWJF, 2010). Because of the significant increase in testing pressure, schools are trying to crunch every bit of quality instruction into each school day. That certainly is not an easy challenge. Allocating time so that it is most productive is absolutely the goal of schools. Pellegrini and Bohn (2005) claimed:

Perhaps most broadly, schools are organizing schedules so that instructional time is maximized and non-instructional time, such as recess is minimized. This practice may follow from the assumption that minimizing recess affords more opportunities for instruction, which should, therefore maximize performance. (p. 13)

Pellegrini (2008) took on this argument when he appeared on *Good Morning America* along with Benjamin Canada, who was the superintendent of the Atlanta Public Schools at the time. Canada had made national news for eliminating recess and replacing it with physical education (Johnson, 1998). Canada stated that the no-recess policy was adopted because “We are intent on improving academic performance. You don’t do that by having kids hanging on monkey bars!” (Johnson, 1998, para. 11). Canada claimed that when recess was eliminated “he had raised achievement scores” (Pellegrini, 2008, p. 182). However, when Pellegrini and the *Good Morning America* host asked for evidence, “no one has ever presented data to uphold such a claim” (Pellegrini, 2008, p. 182).

As one can imagine, meeting testing and academic mandates is a daunting task, and even greater for schools with more limited resources or schools that serve higher needs populations, such as Title I schools. Effectively allocating time and helping all students learn the most possible requires significant thought and frequent reevaluation. However, as discussed earlier, providing children with a recess break improves their ability to process new information and perform academically in the classroom, and studies have shown that recess promotes better behavior in the classroom. Accordingly, providing children a daily recess break may support these learning goals and likely improve testing scores.

Safety, Supervision, and Bullying

Most — if not all — would agree it is important for all students to feel safe and secure at school, and it is a school’s responsibility to provide a safe learning environment. Creating a safe place, however, is not an easy task. Even when strong policies are in place

to prevent bullying or other disruptive, unsafe behavior, it is impossible to stop any and all negative behavior — whether physical or verbal — from occurring. Schools consider recess to be the biggest challenge to daily behavior management, and principals feel that the majority of disciplinary problems occur outside the classroom, citing recessing and lunch as the major issues (RWJF, 2010).

When we examine the very nature of what recess is, unstructured time, usually outdoors on a playground, where children direct their activity and social interaction, supervised or monitored by adults, there are bound to be some problems, especially in comparison to much more structured, focused, and sedentary activity in a classroom. Physical activity will naturally lead to occasional injuries, whether that is a scraped knee, a bruise, or a broken wrist. Children interacting with each other on their own terms may lead to hurt feelings and conflict. There are even issues with proper adult supervision of students during recess. In some schools, teachers are tired from other responsibilities and are unfocused which leads to poor supervision. In other schools, recess is monitored by paraprofessionals or volunteers who are often not properly trained on how to handle behavioral issues. One article summed this issue up stating “Notably, a lack of equipment coupled with teacher burnout may impede the facilitation of a recess climate in which children are physically active and engaged” (Massey, Stellino, Claassen, Dykstra & Henning, 2018, p. 48). Recess — which is intended to be an enjoyable break and outlet for physical activity — creates significant challenges for administrators and teachers in some schools. Conflicts may even turn violent and students feel the effects of an unsafe environment. “Violent behaviors have been reported, and up to 23% of urban elementary

school students view the playground as an unsafe space” (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome & Nay, 2003; Astor, Meyer & Pitner, 2001, as cited in Massey, Stellino, Claassen, Dykstra & Henning, 2018, p. 48). Problems on the playground spill over into the classroom following recess and into administrators’ offices as well. The RWJF (2007) reported that “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!’” (p. 9).

However, research has shown that aggression on playgrounds is lower than one might expect. “Of all the behaviors observed on preschool and primary school playgrounds in many countries, physical and verbal aggression account for less than 2 percent of the total” (Pellegrini, 1995; Smith & Connolly, 1980, as cited in Pellegrini, 2008, p. 183). Pellegrini (2008) also asserted that children may get bullied anywhere there is not appropriate adult supervision, such as hallways, cafeterias, and bathrooms. While two percent may seem small, it still needs to be considered and addressed. That two percent draws the focus of teachers and principals, because that is a problem they have to manage and address. The ninety-eight percent of behavior in recess that is positive or neutral does not create a problem. There is not a crying student, a disciplinary report, or a parent phone call associated with those positive behaviors. As such, if schools have a recess program, it is important to proactively address bullying by providing appropriate supervision and training for any adults monitoring recess, and set clear expectations and consequences for recess with students.

Is it possible to provide a perfectly safe recess for students? There is likely no way to eliminate all risk. But can the safety issues be sufficiently addressed to provide a positive, beneficial recess experience? The American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) addressed this issue:

A child's safety during recess is a concern for many parents, teachers, and administrators. Some schools even have chosen to ban games or activities deemed unsafe and, in some cases, to discontinue recess altogether in light of the many issues connected with child safety. Although schools should ban games and activities that are unsafe, they should not discontinue recess altogether just because of concerns connected with child safety.

There are measures schools can take to address these concerns and protect children while preserving play during recess. (p. 184)

In the policy statement, the AAP (2013) listed six guidelines to help ensure a safe recess for children, listed as:

1. Provision of adequate safe spaces and facilities.
2. Maintenance of developmentally appropriate equipment with regular inspections.
3. Establishment and enforcement of safety rules.
4. Implementation of recess curriculum in physical education classes to teach games, rules, and conflict resolution.
5. Establishment of a school-wide clear policy to prevent bullying or aggressive behavior.

6. Provision of adequate supervision by qualified adults who can intervene in the event a child's physical or emotional safety is in jeopardy. (p. 184)

To be blunt, a positive recess program is intentional and requires work.

Leadership is certainly key to the success of a recess program. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2017) states: "An engaged principal is key. A sustainable change in school recess culture is possible only with committed school leadership. It is critical for leadership to promote the value of safe and healthy play at recess and how it can support the school's academic goals" (p. 2). They continue to add that leadership at the district level must also be invested, adding "School districts can support safe and healthy recess by prioritizing positive school climate and elevating the status of recess by creating policies to support recess for every child every day" (RWJW, 2017, p. 2). Recess must be well supervised by qualified adults who are focused, playgrounds and equipment must be safe, and schools need to have strong policies that teach students what bullying is, and provide appropriate consequences when bullying occurs. Generally, however, a safe, engaging recess program is possible. When connected with the numerous evidential benefits, recess can advance the school's goal of early learning and whole child development.

Current Policy Regarding Recess

As we have come to understand the benefits and challenges of school recess, we shift focus to current policy and implementation. This leads us to our third question: *What is current policy regarding school recess?* Recess policy — whether to have it at all, for how long, and if so, whether a teacher or administrator can withhold it from a

student for academic or behavioral reasons — “is often a local school decision” (Adams, n.d., “Who Decides?”). In some cases, state law or district policy may guide decisions, but most often, recess and its implementation is left to the individual school and principal. “Generally, individual schools determine policy for recess. In fact, in 87% of the schools that reported having recess, different practices were observed within the same district” (Pellegrini, 2005 as cited in Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005, p. 13). For example, one elementary school might have a fifteen-minute recess break, while at another elementary school in the same district students might receive two breaks of twenty minutes. However, tying with the research question for this section, “school policy should be based on the best theory and empirical evidence available” (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005, p. 13). But is policy based on research with regards to this topic? This section explores current policy regarding school recess.

In 1989, a national survey was taken of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Noting that this was more than a decade prior to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 96% of principals reported having one or two recess breaks each day at their elementary school (as cited in Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). One decade later in 1999, and shortly before NCLB was enacted, a national survey found that only 70% of Kindergarten classrooms had a recess period, meaning that 30% of Kindergarten classrooms did not have recess at all (as cited in Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005). In 2006, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted a survey and found that 79% of elementary schools provide a daily recess break to elementary school students (cited in Adams, n.d.). As survey findings change depending on a variety of factors including sample size and

questions asked, it would be difficult to accurately estimate how many schools provide daily recess to elementary school students. However, it is believed that since the added pressures of NCLB, the percentage of elementary school students who are given a daily school recess break, has decreased.

In addition to considering if students are provided with a recess break at all, it is important to consider how much recess they are given, or the duration of recess. With academic and testing pressures, many schools have reported decreasing recess time, if they have not taken away recess altogether. According to research studies conducted by Zygmunt-Fillwalk and Bidello (2005) and McKenzie and Kahan (2008) “Up to 40 percent of U.S. school districts have reduced or eliminated recess in order to free up more time for core academics, and one in four elementary schools no longer provides recess to all grades” (as cited in RWJF, 2010, p. 4). Research has also shown that decreased time for recess most often hits communities that arguably need it the most. However, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) stated that “the period allotted to recess decreases as the child ages and is less abundant among children of lower socioeconomic status and in the urban setting” (p. 183). In my opinion, it would be more likely that these are the children that need recess more, particularly students in urban settings or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as they may be less safe to play after school at a local park, go for a bicycle ride in their neighborhood, and may not be able to afford activities that children from more affluent families participate in.

However, some states have recently taken the subject of recess as an issue for legislation. There are currently four states that require a minimum of twenty minutes of

recess in elementary schools — Missouri, Florida, New Jersey, and Rhode Island (Shammas, 2019). Similarly, Arizona has enacted a law that requires two recess breaks be provided to elementary school students, but it does not specify the minimum duration (Shammas, 2019). Seven other states — Iowa, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, Texas, Connecticut, and Virginia — now require daily physical activity, but leave implementation up to school districts or individual schools (Shammas, 2019). In Minnesota, there are currently no statutes that require recess (Public Health Law Center, n.d.). Minnesota Statutes simply state, “Schools are strongly encouraged not to exclude students in kindergarten through grade 5 from recess due to punishment or disciplinary action” (Minn. Stat. § 120B.026, 2019). Additionally, it is important to note that while there are no federal laws that mandate or require a school to provide physical activity or recess for children, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — a federal agency under the Department of Health and Human Services — officially recommends all children receive at least 20 minutes of recess daily (CDC, 2017 as cited in Shammas, 2019).

Another important aspect of recess policy is the issue of “withholding” recess. Essentially, this debate focuses on whether a teacher or administrator can take away or “withhold” a student’s recess for either incomplete academic work or as punishment for poor behavior. The prevalence of withholding recess is quite alarming. “In 2006, the CDC found that 81.5% of elementary schools allowed students to be withheld from recess” (as cited in Turner, Chiriqui & Chaloupka, 2013, p. 534). A similar study in 2009

of the National Association of Elementary School Principals found that 77% reported taking away recess as a form of punishment (RWJF, 2010).

But why are teachers and school leaders withholding recess and what exactly is this accomplishing? Put simply, educators often believe that the practice of withholding recess from students is effective, because it “clearly communicates to children that their misbehavior is unacceptable” (Blad, 2015, para. 1). However, taking away what many children enjoy most and look forward to — free time to play outside — may create distrust and animosity between the student and teacher. While many teachers might feel that withholding recess is effective, it is — after consideration — truly counterproductive. Taking away recess, especially from children that truly need a break — overactive, defiant, and more difficult students — deprives them of the time they need most: the time designated to get their energy out (Blad, 2015).

However, some schools and school districts have created policies that either limit or completely prohibit a teacher or administrator from withholding recess for academic or behavior issues. In schools with stronger policies regarding withholding recess, a teacher might only be able to withhold recess for specific reasons, be able to take away part of the recess break, or be entirely prohibited from taking away a student’s recess time. Some school policies are written so that withholding recess is simply “discouraged,” but still allowed at the teacher or administrator’s discretion. In some cases where these policies are implemented, there is significant “push-back” from teachers, as teachers believe that withholding recess is a natural or logical consequence for “bad” behavior (Blad, 2015, “Teacher Resistance”). The frustration for many teachers is finding behavior management

techniques that work. One professor-researcher noted that often “teachers express frustration and a sense that they have few other options for controlling misbehavior in their classrooms” (Anderson Cordell, 2013, para. 3). Quite simply, when teachers feel they are not equipped with strategies or tools for managing classroom behavior, they may believe there is no other option. Providing teachers more training or instruction in strategies such as Responsive Classroom, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), or other classroom management models may be more effective, and encourage a more positive classroom climate than simply taking away recess. If teachers feel that taking away recess is their only effective tool in their “toolbox,” the answer is not to use that tool as much as needed; we need to expand and add to the teacher’s toolbox so they have more options.

There is one significant research study to consider with regards to recess and policy. A team of researchers examined policies regarding recess and recess practices beginning with the 2008-2009 school year through the 2010-2011 school year (Turner, Chriqui & Chaloupka, 2013). They analyzed data in three different ways: by a school-level mailed survey, review of district policies, and examination of relevant state law (Turner, Chriqui & Chaloupka, 2013, p. 534). District-level policies, were coded as either “restricting physical activity (eg, withholding recess) or using physical activity (eg, running) as punishment” and were also coded as having a “strong” provision if it was prohibited, or a “weak” provision if it was simply discouraged (Turner, Chriqui & Chaloupka, 2013, p. 535). If there was no policy on the topic, that was recorded as well. Finally, they reviewed state law. Only one state — North Carolina — had a “strong” law

with regards to recess; in North Carolina, a school or teacher cannot withhold physical activity such as recess and cannot use it as punishment either (Turner, Chriqui & Chaloupka, 2013). No states were found to have “weak” laws. In analyzing the data collected from 1,582 elementary schools, the researchers found that 28.3% of schools reported that withholding recess was not allowed for behavior, and 26.7% reported that it is not allowed to complete work (Turner, Chriqui & Chaloupka, 2013). In addition, they found that 19.6% of school districts had strong policies in place, 18% had weak policies, and 62.4% had no policy. They concluded that district policies were significantly associated with school practices (Turner, Chriqui & Chaloupka, 2013).

While providing recess does present some challenges, the benefits it provides students not just in the classroom, but in terms of whole child development, cannot be denied or diminished. Policy needs to match the theory and evidence. As summarized by Pellegrini (2008):

Some devalue recess because they assume it to be—as they assume play in young children to be—a waste of time, time that could be otherwise more efficiently spent. There is no theory of empirical evidence to support this point of view. The counter-argument that recess is good, is backed by a large body of theory and empirical research. (p. 190)

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2010) concurred and felt it is time for policy to not just be changed, but in some cases, created:

Recess should no longer be treated as an afterthought or an expendable block of time. Instead, it must be recognized as an essential part of the

school day. In addition, schools should end the practice of taking away recess as punishment. (p. 12)

With the same sentiment, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) argued that recess is a massive opportunity and schools need to support and provide young children with a positive recess program to ensure that they grow not just academically, but as a healthy person in mind and body. They noted that recess “should not be withheld for punitive or academic reasons” (p. 183). Additionally, they stated:

School attendance represents a unique opportunity to address nutrition and physical fitness. Each day 55 million US students attend school, which constitutes nearly one-half of their wakeful hours. In light of rising rates of overweight and obesity, schools have come under increased scrutiny... Ironically, minimizing or eliminating recess may be counterproductive to academic achievement, as a growing body of evidence suggests that recess promotes not only physical health and social development, but also cognitive performance... On the basis of an abundance of scientific studies, withholding recess for punitive reasons would seem counterproductive to the intended outcomes and may have unintended consequences in relation to a child’s acquisition of important life skills. (pp. 185-186)

In reviewing current policy in our school systems, it is clear that recess is important for students and policy should reflect this. Currently, it does not. While research provides numerous benefits of a strong recess program, states are not making recess a priority.

Unfortunately, most schools are also not creating strong policies with regard to recess (Turner, Chriqui & Chaloupka, 2013).

Accordingly, it is important that recess be given credit for what it is. Research has proven that recess helps students learn more effectively and classroom behavior is better with recess. Children need a break from rigorous academic work and be physically active each day to create lifelong healthy habits. Socially and emotionally, evidence supports the myriad of ways that recess helps a child develop and grow. Some may say that recess is lost time, and students should be in the classroom learning. However, cognitively, the brain learns and retains information better when a “distributed practice” theory is utilized, and children are given appropriate breaks. Supervision, safety, and bullying are legitimate challenges for school leaders, but they are obstacles that can and should be addressed.

In most areas, policy does not reflect the importance of recess. While some states have enacted laws to provide students with a recess break, most often, decisions regarding recess are made by each school, often by the elementary school principal. While most elementary schools still have recess, too many do not as academic and testing pressures have increased, along with concerns about safety and bullying. Instead of addressing and solving the problems, recess is simply being eliminated. Additionally, in most schools, teachers and administrators withhold recess from students for incomplete work or as a consequence of poor behavior, which is counterproductive. Unfortunately, the numerous benefits of recess for students are often being ignored.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Methods

Rationale

In the second chapter of this Capstone, I explored relevant academic research related to the topic of school recess. The literature review covered the myriad of benefits that recess provides to students including the academic, behavioral, health, social and emotional benefits. In addition, we discussed the obstacles and challenges schools are often confronted with in implementing recess safely and successfully, and the current state of policy with regards to recess. As was uncovered, in most cases, policy is determined by the individual schools, sometimes with guidance or direction of the school district.

This chapter explains and describes the original research that was conducted to further investigate the three research questions: 1) *What are the benefits to students in school recess breaks?* 2) *What are the obstacles or challenges schools face with recess?* And 3) *What is current policy regarding school recess?* The purpose of this research was to develop a greater understanding of current recess practices and policies. Additionally, in conducting this research, the intention was to inform decision-makers including principals, teachers, district administrators, and policymakers.

Methodology and Scope

Certainly, recess is an issue that impacts students throughout the United States. However, for the research in this Capstone, the scope will be limited to elementary schools in Minnesota. In Minnesota, as the legislative statute only “encourages” schools

to provide recess and not withhold it for punitive reasons, creating policy and implementing a recess program is left to individual districts or schools. This provided a great opportunity for exploratory research as to how principals and schools were implementing recess.

To assess and analyze the state of recess in Minnesota's current educational system, I selected a mixed-methods approach, to collect qualitative and quantitative data. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2017), "the core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone" (p. 4). The mixed-methods approach allows for the gathering of quantitative data, to provide for greater understanding, in addition to collecting qualitative data for further exploration (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, mixed methods research seems most appropriate, as it provides for "explaining quantitative results with a follow-up data collection and analysis" and "incorporating the perspectives of individuals" (Creswell, 2014, p. 218).

Selecting Setting and Participants

As was discovered in the literature review section, principals typically make the decisions regarding school recess in today's elementary schools. Further, in Minnesota, there is no state law that mandates schools to provide students with daily recess or prohibits schools from withholding recess as punishment. Therefore, it became apparent that this study focuses on elementary school principals to gather their opinions on this topic. As principals are acting as the "decision makers" in our society with regards to recess, they were the appropriate subject of this research study.

Given that principals have incredible demands, it was believed that requesting the opinion of a larger sample size would be beneficial, as response rate may be lower than if teachers or parents were surveyed. One hundred and twenty random elementary school principals in Minnesota were selected and asked to complete an online survey through Google Forms. Forty elementary school principals represented urban schools, 40 elementary school principals represented suburban schools, and the final 40 elementary school principals represented rural schools. This selection allowed for a broad representation of students. In addition to various regions of the state, these principals will represent the diversity of their communities. These 120 principals represented thousands of students of many ethnicities, first languages, abilities and disabilities, family structures, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, it is important to note that in this random selection of elementary school principals, perceived gender was not noted.

All principals were from public school districts, which may or may not have written policy on the subject of school recess. Some “choice schools,” including charter or magnet schools were also included in the study.

Additionally, to increase participation and further randomize selection, and with consultation of the thesis committee, we posted the survey link on Twitter. We included a mention of the topical hashtag of #MESPAMN (Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association) and #MESPAPrincipals for their followers to be alerted of the survey.

Timing

This research was approved by the Hamline University Institutional Review Board in July 2020. Then, the survey was opened to the elementary school principals on

July 25, 2020. It remained open for a period of four weeks, and closed on August 23, 2020. This intention of this timing — over the summer break period — was intended to elicit a higher response rate from the elementary school principals, than if it was sent during the school year when teachers and administrators may be busier. However, it is important to note that, during this time period, the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant obstacle for schools, and schools were in the process of planning and implementing their plans for the beginning of the school year during the worldwide pandemic.

Survey Development

A Google Form was selected for the medium for providing this survey to the elementary school principals for a variety of reasons. First, it was easy to create and ask a variety of quantitative and qualitative questions, and request various responses types. Additionally, a Google Form was easy to send to survey participants, and also for participants to respond quickly and efficiently. As principals have a high demand for their time, it was critical that the survey be easy to access and complete. Finally, I believed that a Google Form would also be a helpful tool when analyzing survey results. For these reasons, this online tool was chosen for this survey on school recess.

The survey was provided as an electronic Google Form, sent to each principal via email. Included in the email to the principal was a brief request for their participation and explanation of this research. The email included a brief description of the research and its academic nature, and noted that the research was approved by the Hamline University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB Approved Consent Form was attached to the email for the participants to review. The email, as well as the survey, advised the

participants that all participation is completely voluntary, and beyond academic research gained from survey results, I will gain nothing physical or monetary. Additionally, to encourage principals to participate, the email indicated that principals who participate could be entered into a drawing to win a \$25.00 Amazon gift card for their school. Entering the drawing was completely voluntary. A link to complete the Google Form survey was included within the email.

Also, it is important to note that a brief reminder email with the survey link was sent to the 120 elementary school principals two weeks and three weeks after the survey opened. This was intended to prompt additional responses and advise that their participation was still needed.

As previously mentioned, the survey was “tweeted” on Twitter to obtain additional responses from other Minnesota elementary school principals who were not emailed directly. The tweet read: “@MESPAPrincipals - Please help! Short online survey on school recess for my Masters @Hamline” and provided the survey link.

The Google Form survey asked a series of questions that measured quantitative data. Additionally, the survey will request responses that seek qualitative answers from the participating principals. A copy of the survey is included in the Appendix.

Generally, the survey was designed to be quick for the convenience of the respondents, but create substantial data to provide greater insight to the three research questions of this Capstone thesis. The first page of the survey was the IRB Informed Consent information. A question asked the participant to confirm if they understood the purpose of the survey and if they were voluntarily agreeing to participate. Two options

were provided for respondents for this question: 1) Yes; or 2) No - Do not move forward or continue. The second page contained the quantitative and qualitative questions for the research on school recess. The entirety of the survey is provided in Appendix A. The third page of the survey asked two final questions and requested the principals to input their email addresses voluntarily, if they would like to be entered into the drawing and to receive a copy of this Capstone upon completion. Both questions were marked optional. To minimize the risk of confidentiality, any email addresses provided for the drawing were entered into a random drawing and winners were drawn immediately upon closing the survey. Following the drawing, these email addresses were immediately deleted. Email addresses to receive the Capstone thesis upon completion were kept separately. No other questions identified the participant.

Prior to this survey being sent to any school principals, this study was reviewed in full and approved by the Hamline University Institutional Review Board. This approval was denoted to participants in the initial email correspondence and at the beginning of the survey.

I believe the questions posed will provide an incredible amount of information and data, both qualitative and quantitative. The responses to these questions will better paint a portrait of school recess in Minnesota, as seen from elementary school principals, including the perceived benefits, challenges, and policies.

Survey Return and Potential Complications

The goal response or return rate for this study was 20 percent, or 24 elementary school principals. In discussion with the committee, it was important to set a reasonable goal, as this survey was sent to school principals and not teachers or parents.

Additionally, we discussed and noted that in the midst of a global pandemic, responses to a survey may be slightly suppressed as prioritization might be on other tasks. However, this level of participation would provide enough qualitative and quantitative data to compare and analyze responses. Initially, we agreed that should the response rate be less than 10 percent, or 12 elementary school principals, the survey could be expanded and may be sent to a larger sample size, possibly 200 or 300 elementary school principals. Additionally, one possibility is a significant lack of response might also be an indication of perceived importance or a data point. Meaning, if elementary school principals do not respond, their lack of response may be indicating how important they believe school recess is, in comparison to other topics. However, this could also be a mere presumption.

Finally, should it be absolutely necessary, due to low response rate or other unforeseen circumstances, we discussed changing the method of data collection for this research. If necessary, the committee discussed obtaining information from a smaller number of participants through one-on-one interviews. While many of the questions would remain the same, and the goals of the research would largely remain unchanged, this alternative method could prove effective if necessary. We discussed that these interviews could be conducted by videoconference due to the pandemic.

Summary

In this chapter, we have explored my research design and methods that will further answer the three research questions: 1) *What are the benefits to students in school recess breaks?* 2) *What are the obstacles or challenges schools face with recess?* And 3) *What is current policy regarding school recess?* Through a mixed-methods approach, primarily through an online survey, elementary school principals will share their important perspectives on school recess, in addition to data that will further show what is actually happening in our schools. In the next chapter, we will uncover the results of this survey and analyze the collected data.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

To further analyze and develop a deeper understanding of the three research questions of this Capstone - 1) *What are the benefits to students in school recess breaks?* 2) *What are the obstacles or challenges schools face with recess?* And 3) *What is current policy regarding school recess?* — it is critical to review the responses and data collected in the survey. As discussed in the previous chapter, an electronic survey was sent to 120 elementary school principals in July and August, 2020. Their participation was requested to better understand the current perspectives and implementation of recess in Minnesota schools. Over a period of four weeks, twenty-seven elementary school principals responded to the survey, providing their valuable insight on school recess, including its benefits, obstacles and challenges, and the current policies in their schools. This chapter will review and analyze the results of the data collected, including demographic information, quantitative data, and qualitative data as provided by the participating principals.

Demographics

It is critical to first examine some basic demographic information as reported by the participating principals, to not only identify who is participating in the survey, but also to consider what schools and students are then represented by the data that has been collected. This allows us to better understand and analyze a survey.

Participating principals were asked: “Please select the option that best describes the region of your school.” It is important to note that this survey was directly emailed to an equal number of rural, suburban and urban school principals (40 each), or one-third of each. The principals self-reported as follows:

Table 1

Principal Survey Responses: Please select the option that best describes the region of your school.

Region	Number of Schools	Percentage of total
Rural	10	37%
Suburban	12	44.4%
Urban	5	18.5%

While there was not equal representation between all regions, there were multiple principals from each region who participated in this survey.

Additionally, the survey asked the principals to indicate: “How many students attend your school?” This was an important indicator, as the principals who participated in this survey and their leadership impacts a much larger body of students. The principals provided the following data:

Table 2

Principal Survey Responses: How many students attend your school?

Number of Students	Number of Schools
1-200 students	2
201-400 students	3
401-600 students	10
601-800 students	11
801 or more students	1

In reviewing this data, this means that 77.8% of schools that were represented in this survey had between 401-800 students enrolled.

Finally, the last demographic question that was posed to the participating principals was in regards to their tenure as an administrator. They were asked: “How many total years have you been an administrator/principal?” There was a significant range of 23 years for responses for this question, with 1 year being the lowest and 24 years of service being the highest. The mean response was 12.7 years, and the median answer for years of service was 14. In calculating the mode, both 14 years and 15 years had 4 responses.

In reviewing the demographic data, one can better understand the principals who are responding to the survey, as well as the schools and students they are representing. As the leaders and decision-makers for their schools, their decisions on school recess are significant.

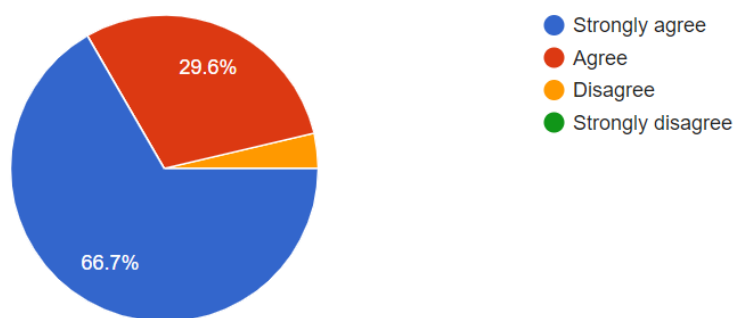
Quantitative Data

As noted in the previous chapter, collection of quantitative data is important for this research, as it provides for greater understanding of our research questions, and responses can be compared numerically (Creswell, 2014).

In the survey, the principals were asked: “Please select the best option for your opinion on this statement: Recess is a priority at my school.” They were asked if they “Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree.” As the chart below depicts, the participating principals overwhelmingly stated that they either strongly agree (blue) or agree (red), as 96.3% responded that recess was a priority at their school. Only one principal disagreed with the statement.

Figure 1

Principal Survey Responses: Please select the best option for your opinion on this statement: Recess is a priority at my school.



Principals were also requested to provide data regarding the length of time each grade at their school is given for recess. Specifically, they were asked: “How many minutes of recess does each grade at your school have daily?” While the responses varied

as anticipated, the mode for all grades was 20 to 39 minutes daily. Also, a longer recess break was more likely to occur for younger students. Finally, in examining data, it is important to note that some schools did not have all grades, most often fifth (4 schools) or sixth grade (13 schools). However, when schools did have these grades, older children were more likely to be given no recess break. The full results for this question are noted in the table below.

Table 3

Principal Survey Responses: How many minutes of recess does each grade at your school have daily?

Grade	0 minutes	1-19 minutes	20-39 minutes	40-59 minutes	60+ minutes
K	0	3	17	4	2
1	0	3	19	3	1
2	0	3	21	2	1
3	0	3	22	1	1
4	0	3	22	1	1
5	2	4	15	1	1
6	3	1	9	0	1

Note: Each principal selected one option for each grade, to indicate how many minutes of recess each grade was provided.

The survey also requested the principals to state their positions on a five of statements on the benefits and challenges of school recess. The purpose of this was to further explore the research questions, as well as the benefits and challenges discussed in

the Literature Review of this Capstone. Options for the responses included Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

Table 4

Principal Survey Responses: Please indicate your opinion on the following statements.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Recess benefits students academically.	16	11	0	0
Recess improves classroom behavior.	14	12	1	0
Recess promotes positive health — mental and physical.	22	5	0	0
Recess provides opportunities for social and emotional development.	24	3	0	0
Recess is difficult to implement and manage.	2	7	16	5

From these statements and responses, we can see that overall, principals agree that recess benefits students in numerous ways, and more strongly with regards to health and social and emotional development. Additionally, when considering the obstacles of recess, this survey showed that more principals actually disagreed that it was difficult to implement and manage than agreed. Coupled with their views on the benefits of recess, this leads me to believe that principals see the benefits outweighing the challenges in most situations.

With regards to the second research question, focusing on the challenges and obstacles school recess presents, school principals were posed with the following

question: “What are the challenges or obstacles that you face when it comes to recess?”

Principals were provided with a variety of answers including 1) Time, academic requirements; 2) Safety, bullying; 3) Supervision; 4) Finances, resources; and finally an option to add their own comments. Additionally, it is important to note that the principals had the option to select multiple answers for this question. For the answers provided, the principals responded as indicated in the table below:

Table 5

Principal Survey Responses: What are the challenges or obstacles that you face when it comes to recess?

Response	Times selected
Time, academic requirements	11 (40.7%)
Safety, bullying	10 (37%)
Supervision	18 (66.7%)
Finances, resources	4 (14.8%)

Note: The participating principals (27 total) could select multiple responses.

Additional responses were provided by six principals. They included “periodically weather,” “hand sanitization,” “resolving conflict after recess,” “none” (indicated by three responses), and “teachers want to use recess as an option to take it away as punishment.” These responses corroborate what was previously covered in chapter two. However, the responses from principals indicating minimal or no obstacles or challenges were promising and hopeful that a successful recess program is possible.

As noted in the Literature Review, supervision is sometimes an obstacle or challenge. This was also corroborated in the previously discussed question, as principals

reported this as their greatest challenge. Therefore, it was important to ask principals for further information regarding the supervision of recess. The question: “Who supervises recess at your school?” was posed with a variety of options to select including teachers, paraprofessionals or educational assistants, administrators, volunteers, as well as an option for another response. Principals could also select more than one choice, if necessary. Overall, there were eleven principals (40.7%) who identified that their recess supervision is a shared responsibility between multiple groups. The principals responded as noted in the table below.

Table 6

Principal Survey Responses: Who supervises recess at your school?

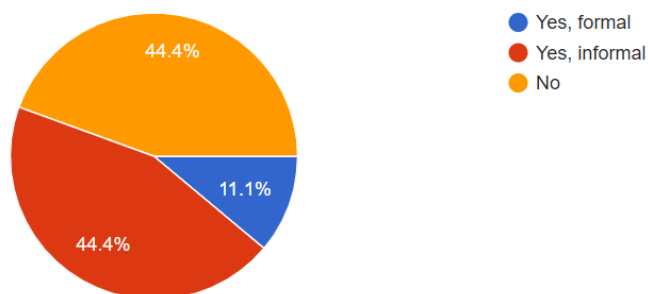
Supervisor	Number of Responses
Paraprofessionals/Educational Assistants	24 (88.9%)
Teachers	12 (44.4%)
Administrators	8 (29.6%)
Volunteers	1 (3.7%)

Note: The participating principals (27 total) could select multiple responses.

To examine the final research question, it was important to survey principals regarding school’s policies on school recess. The survey asked the principals to respond to the following question: “Does your school have any policy — formal or informal — regarding recess?” Principals were provided with three options for response - 1) Yes, formal; 2) Yes, informal; or 3) No.

Figure 2

Principal Survey Responses: Does your school have any policy — formal or informal — regarding recess?

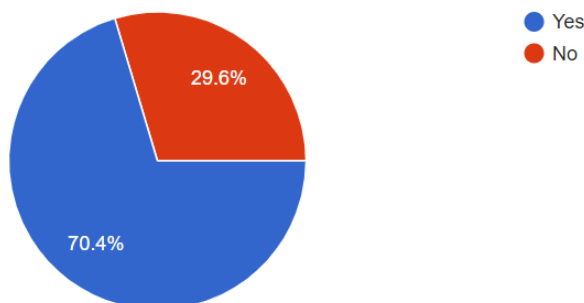


Note: A formal policy would be a written, disseminated policy, whereas an informal policy would be a general understanding. This could be in regards to the duration of recess or an educator's ability to withhold recess from a student.

As is indicated in the chart above, only three schools have a formal policy on school recess. The remaining 24 schools were split equally between an informal policy and no policy at all. Additionally, the principals were asked: "Can teachers at your school withhold recess for academic or behavioral reasons?" They were given the options to respond 1) Yes; or 2) No. Out of 27 responses, 19 principals affirmed that recess can be withheld, and 8 stated that recess cannot be withheld at their schools.

Figure 3

Principal Survey Responses: Can teachers at your school withhold recess for academic or behavioral reasons?



In reviewing the quantitative data provided by the responses from the participating principals, we develop a greater understanding for the current practices of school recess in elementary schools in Minnesota. This information will be illustrated to a greater extent when we review the qualitative data in the next section.

Qualitative Data

In reviewing qualitative data, one is able to gain a narrative perspective and deeper understanding of a topic, in this case, school recess. In order to expand our comprehension and create a more complete perception of this topic, it was critical to include a few important questions in our survey.

One question posed to the participating principals was: “Briefly, what do you believe is the purpose of recess?” While their answers varied significantly, there were some common themes. Keywords regarding physical activity or exercise including “movement,” “move,” and “fitness” were included in 25 of the 27 responses. Additionally, keywords relating to socialization including “social,” “relationships,” and

“friendships” were included in 22 responses. The specific word “play” was used in nine responses. Words related to academic benefits including “cognitive,” “break,” “learning,” and “academic” were used in nine responses. These trends show what principals perceive to be the intent and purpose of recess. One principal responded stating, “Students need to move their bodies at the elementary level in order to best learn. It is not only physical, but a very important social experience that helps students to grow and learn to be problem solvers.” Another said that recess was about “Building relationships through play; exercise; learning how to navigate relationships with peers.” A third principal shared their perspective that “The purpose of recess is to take a ‘break’ from the academic rigors and engage in ‘free-play’ to help build both physical and social skills during that time.” These insights provide a glimpse into the minds of principals, and guide us towards greater understanding.

Continuing in the survey, the principals were asked to respond to the question: “As a principal, what do you believe are the primary benefits of recess, for students?” Many trends that were noted in the previous question were repeated, specifically high responses regarding exercise/activity (in 21 responses) and social interaction (in 19 responses). The principals noted that the benefits include “Problem solving, physical wellness, social development, increased focus in classrooms, and creative play” and stated that “It causes kids to learn how to be friends and navigate difficult relationships.” It was also noted that recess “Allows kids to be kids, interact with others in a less structured environment and gives them the necessary fresh air and opportunity to move their bodies.” Some principals made lists of the various benefits including relaxation,

improved learning, play with friends, Vitamin D intake, fresh air, stress, choice, exercise, unstructured play, among other benefits.

In the survey, the principals were also asked for additional information regarding their school's policies, if any, regarding school recess. The question stated: "If your school has a policy regarding recess, please link it or copy it here." While only five principals entered a response to this question, the responses were insightful. One principal stated that "The school board mandated 30 minutes of recess for every elementary school." A different principal responded that "Our Board of Education requires 20 minutes of recess per day. As principal, I tell teachers to plan for that amount of time." Another principal reported that "Students must go outside unless they have a doctor's note. If they are well enough to be at school, they are well enough to be outside." A link to a district page was provided by one principal. This led to a district "Wellness Policy" with information on nutrition and physical activity. Included was a requirement for a minimum of 20 minutes of recess for all elementary students.

The final survey question was with regards to principals' perspectives on withholding recess as a form of discipline. Specifically, the question read: "What is your opinion on teachers and administrators withholding recess from students for academic or behavioral reasons?" The responses to this question provided some important information on the complexity of the situation. Responses included words and phrases like "discouraged," "mixed," "last resort," "don't recommend," and "situational." Some principals stated that recess is not withheld for academic reasons, but may be for some

behavioral reasons, depending on the situation. Below are a selection of the responses received from the participating principals:

- If it is effective with a specific child, then it can be motivating for a child to attend to work and use kindness in interactions. If a child is repeatedly assigned no-recess, then it is not effective for the child and can be a detriment to growth.
- We do not support withholding recess for academic reasons, however, students may not get recess as a consequence for behavior reasons, especially if students are repeatedly not making safe choices at recess.
- Should only happen when it is a safety issue... ie fighting bullying
- Only as a last resort. Never for academic reasons.
- Depends on the child. The withholding [sic] is limited to occasional and time limited. If it is withheld [sic], it is teacher managed (no place to send a child to miss recess for academic needs). If it is social, it is a natural consequence to a behavior that was unsafe and a time to teach a replacement behavior.
- We do not withhold for academic reasons. The only reason we withhold recess is if there is an unsafe behavior choice that is made at recess.
- I do not agree with the decision, unless that is where the unexpected behavior occurred. At which time the student and adult will role-play outside the expected behaviors so the student can practice expected behaviors. It has to serve as a learning opportunity, yet still after practicing the student gets to engage in recess again that day.

- I do not support withholding recess, but I have done it as I struggle to find other options
- It's situational -- our philosophy is not to withhold recess, but there are certain circumstances where I support it
- We try not to do this as we know kids need recess. The ones that it is withheld from are often the ones who need it the most. It is usually a last resort.

Considering the information provided in the Literature Review regarding policies on withholding recess, and the data provided in the survey from these elementary school principals, one can clearly see that this is a complicated issue. While the principals seemed to agree philosophically that recess should not be withheld, the reality is that it is withheld at least occasionally in some schools, as it is effective. As was noted in academic research, the responses generally show that while principals may not often agree with the practice, withholding recess does occur in many schools at least occasionally. It seems that it is situational or occasional, but that it is difficult to find other classroom or behavior management practices that are as effective.

Summary

As I consider the data collected and analyzed in this chapter, we can begin to make some conclusions with regards to our research questions. Overall, the data collected affirms the academic literature. Elementary school principals agree that there are incredible benefits to be gained in school recess for students, including academic, behavioral, health, and social-emotional development. Additionally, while there may be some obstacles to creating a positive recess program, they are not insurmountable.

However, currently, the largest divide on this topic seems to be with regards to policy. Academic research including this survey shows that only rarely do schools have a formal policy with regards to school recess, and possibly more importantly, students are still withheld at times from recess. While this is a complicated issue, it is not being adequately addressed for likely a variety of reasons.

In the next and final chapter of this Capstone, I reflect on what has been learned regarding the three research questions: 1) *What are the benefits to students in school recess breaks?* 2) *What are the obstacles or challenges schools face with recess?* And 3) *What is current policy regarding school recess?* Additionally, I consider possible limitations of this research and future research opportunities regarding this topic.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In the final chapter of this Capstone, I once again considered the three primary research questions: 1) *What are the benefits to students in school recess breaks?* 2) *What are the obstacles or challenges schools face with recess?* And 3) *What is current policy regarding school recess?* First, I reviewed the primary learning from the academic literature and the original research which I have carefully analyzed. Then, I considered potential limitations of this research, as well as opportunities for future research on the subject of school recess. Next, I discussed how this Capstone will be disseminated and this research will be shared with key stakeholders. Finally, before concluding this chapter, I considered my personal growth as an author and researcher in completing this Capstone.

Findings

In consideration of the academic literature reviewed and original research conducted, I have cultivated a significantly greater understanding of school recess, specifically regarding its benefits, obstacles, and policies.

Benefits of Recess

When I consider our first research question: *What are the benefits to students in school recess breaks?*, it is critical to note the numerous benefits gained in providing young students a recess break. These benefits can be categorized into four distinct groups — academic, behavioral, health, and social-emotional.

When considering academic benefits provided in recess, the data collected in this research was affirmed by the academic literature. When asked to provide their opinion on

the statement: “Recess benefits students academically,” 59% of principals stated that they strongly agreed and 41% stated that they agreed. No principals stated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Additionally, when principals were asked: “Briefly, what do you believe is the purpose of recess?,” nine responses included words related to academic benefits such as “academic,” “cognitive,” “break,” or “learning.” In consideration of the academic literature and how children learn best, research shows that recess allows for “optimal cognitive processing” by providing breaks in between instructional sessions (AAP, 2013, p. 184). Additionally, recess increases focus and the developing brain’s ability to process new information through “distributed effort” (Pellegrini & Bjorkland, 1997; Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001). Also, it is important to note that physical movement improves cognitive performance and thinking (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001). In a national survey of school principals, 80% reported that they believed recess had a positive impact on academic achievement (RWJF, 2010).

The data collected in the research for this Capstone was affirmed by the academic literature. When asked to provide their opinion on the statement: “Recess improves classroom behavior,” 52% strongly agreed with this statement, and 44% agreed with this statement. Only one principal or 4% indicated that they disagreed with this statement. In consideration of academic literature regarding the behavioral benefits of school recess, three research studies were reviewed and analyzed. In all studies, behaviors with negative connotations decreased when a recess break was provided to students (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993; Barros, Silver & Stein, 2008; Jarret, et al., 2001). Restlessness and fidgeting

decreased after recess. Additionally, in one study, a rating system (“Teacher Rating of Classroom Behavior” or TRCB) was utilized for teachers to report classroom behavior (Barros, Silver & Stein, 2008). Classrooms with a daily recess break of fifteen minutes or more reported better classroom behavior in this survey (Barros, Silver & Stein, 2008).

The data collected in the survey for this research was strongly affirmed by the academic literature. When elementary school principals were asked to provide their opinion on the statement: “Recess promotes positive health — mental and physical,” 81% strongly agreed, and 19% agreed. There were no responses indicating any level of disagreement. Additionally, when principals were asked to describe the purpose of recess, 25 out of the 27 responses included keywords related to health, such as “move,” “movement,” “physical activity,” or “fitness.” This correlates to the academic literature, which states that recess is also incredibly important for encouraging and supporting young children’s physical and mental health. The AAP and CDC recommend sixty minutes of daily physical activity for children (2013). Recess is a critical opportunity to engage students and promote a lifelong, healthy lifestyle (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001; RWJF, 2007; AAP, 2013). It is a balance for sedentary time which is increasing as children are engaging in significantly more “screen time,” and even moderate physical activity can lower the risks of health conditions including obesity (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001; AAP, 2013).

Finally, there are incredible social-emotional benefits to a child’s development gained during school recess. The data collected for this Capstone strongly affirmed the academic research in the literature review. When principals were asked to provide their

opinion to the statement: “Recess provides opportunities for social and emotional development,” more than any other statement, the principals strongly agreed with 89% indicating that they strongly agreed with the statement, and the remaining 11% indicating that they agreed. Additionally, when asked to describe the purpose of recess, 22 principals included keywords related to social-emotional development such as “social,” “friendships,” and “problem-solving,” and “relationships.” This was affirmed by the academic literature, which discussed how recess is an opportunity for young children to play and interact with their peers. However, recess and its social-emotional benefits are infinitely more complex. Research has shown that recess provides students with developmentally appropriate avenues to build social skills and practice important communication skills, while navigating early friendships (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; AAP, 2013). During recess, students may practice problem solving skills, negotiation, conflict resolution, cooperation, teamwork, and sharing (AAP, 2013). They may develop coping skills including perseverance and self control (AAP, 2013). Children learn respect for rules and self discipline, while having to learn to respect the different opinions of others (Pellegrini, 2008). Students are able to practice leadership skills (Adams, n.d.).

Additionally, when children engage in recess and play, they develop a greater imagination and higher levels of creativity (Brez & Sheets, 2017). Children who have positive recess experiences are more likely to have a higher self-esteem and positive attitude towards school (Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001). A national survey found that 96% of principals believed that recess had a positive impact on students’ social development.

As one can see, school recess provides a number of benefits to young children. School recess benefits students as it aids in their cognitive processing and focus when learning, allows for better classroom behavior, promotes physical and mental health, and provides for important social-emotional development. The data collected in the research for this Capstone affirmed that of the academic literature.

Obstacles

In consideration of the second research question - *What are the obstacles or challenges schools face with recess?* - there are often two primary arguments raised as “opposition” to school recess. These arguments include the necessity for maximizing time efficiently, and issues regarding safety, supervision, and bullying.

First, in the data collected for this Capstone, the principals were asked to provide their opinion on the statement: “Recess is difficult to implement and manage.” In response to this question, 2 principals strongly agreed with this statement, 7 agreed, 16 disagreed, and 5 strongly disagreed. This data indicates that one-third agree or strongly agree that recess is a challenge to implement and manage, and two-thirds disagree or strongly disagree with this statement. This contradicts the academic literature that recess is generally a challenge.

Time or prioritization of academic needs is commonly an obstacle of recess. In this Capstone, when principals were asked if time and academic needs were an obstacle or challenge they faced when implementing recess, 40.7% agreed that it was a challenge. Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind and Common Core standards in many states, standardized testing requirements and academic pressure has increased

significantly (Adams, n.d.; Reilly, 2017). It has even been reported that the average student will complete 112 standardized tests in their academic career, between Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade (Reilly, 2017). Therefore, some “opponents” believe that recess time is a waste of valuable time that could be better spent on learning (Pellegrini, 2008). As a result, educators are being forced to extract every minute out of each day, and some schools have decreased recess time due to academic needs (RWJF, 2010).

The second argument is concern regarding safety, supervision, and bullying on the playgrounds. In this Capstone, two-thirds of the principals surveyed stated that supervision was a challenge, and 37% stated that safety and bullying was a challenge. This affirmed the academic literature, which stated that safety and supervision are often a challenge of recess. While a recess program should be safe and well supervised, Pellegrini notes that bullying and aggressive behavior is a smaller issue than many believe (roughly 2% of behaviors), and states that bullying can happen anywhere, including in hallways, cafeterias, and bathrooms (Pellegrini 1995; Pellegrini 2008). However, creating a safe and adequately supervised environment for recess can be a challenge for administrators. The American Academy of Pediatrics acknowledged this issue stating that “Whether structured or unstructured, recess should be safe and well supervised. Although schools should ban games and activities that are unsafe, they should not discontinue recess altogether just because of concerns connected with child safety” (2013). As noted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, schools often consider recess

to be a major challenge for behavior management and see the majority of disciplinary issues occurring in recess and lunch (2010).

One additional, and important finding from my data was that three principals indicated that they were not experiencing any challenges or obstacles with recess. This was significant because I had assumed that all principals would indicate one or multiple obstacles to recess, and did not anticipate this response. While I did consider that the principals might not be fully aware of any issues, I do believe if there were significant issues they would be aware of them as the leaders of their schools. This leads me to believe that successful implementation of recess is possible. This adds to the research as in my review of the academic literature, I did not find any similar reports of no challenges with recess.

In consideration of the benefits and obstacles, one must carefully assess and give weight to each. Additionally, it is important to determine if the challenges can be reasonably managed with the appropriate leadership and policies. While recess takes away time from the classroom, we must evaluate the benefits it provides to the whole child, including academic or cognitive benefits, behavioral benefits, health benefits, and social-emotional benefits. Creating a safe, well supervised recess program takes intention and thought and yet challenges may still arise.

Policies

As I review what has been learned in connection with the final research question — *What is current policy regarding school recess?* — I analyze various aspects of educational and school policy with regards to recess.

With some exceptions, to have recess and for how long, is an individual school or school district decision (Adams, n.d.; Reilly, 2017; Shamma, 2019). In this Capstone's research, I found that in most schools, elementary school children were provided a daily recess break of 20-39 minutes in length, however, there was some variation. While there are a few states that require a mandatory recess period, Minnesota does not (PHLC, 2013; Reilly, 2019; Shamma, 2019). Implementation of any informal or formal policy is generally left to the discretion of the elementary school principal (Adams, n.d.). The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that recess time decreases in urban settings, as a child ages, and in lower socioeconomic environments (2013).

Possibly the most controversial debate regarding school recess is regarding policies that allow teachers or administrators to withhold or take away a student's recess for behavioral reasons. This controversy was affirmed in my research. There is a battle between philosophy and reality. While many principals discourage it or argue that it should be rare, their responses indicate that it does happen occasionally. In this Capstone, when principals were asked: At your school, can teachers, administrators, or other professionals withhold recess for academic or behavioral reasons? - 19 stated "Yes," while 8 responded "No." When asked for their opinion on this topic, they had very mixed opinions. The participating principals provided responses including words and phrases like "discouraged," "mixed," "last resort," "don't recommend," and "situational." These words and responses conveyed that the principals understand the complexity of this issue, however led me to believe that withholding children from recess occurs, at least for disciplinary reasons. This was affirmed by the academic literature. Some believe that this

is an effective behavior management tool as recess is highly cherished and withholding it is a logical consequence that communicates to children that their behavior is unacceptable (Blad, 2015). Others feel that taking away recess as a form of discipline is actually counterproductive, as the students who are most likely to lose their recess need this time the most (Blad, 2015). While there is a connection between recess and improved academic performance and behavior, most schools still allow for students to have their recess withheld as a punishment; the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2010) found that 77% of principals report taking away recess as a form of discipline. One study found that strong district policies regarding this were associated with school practices (Turner, Chriqui & Chaloupka, 2013). The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2010) concluded that “schools should end the practice of taking recess away as punishment” (p. 12). The American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) concurred with this opinion, stating that “it should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons” (p. 186).

Overall, the findings of my research generally affirm the academic literature. The principals agreed with the multitude of benefits that recess provides. The principals participating in my survey also affirmed that there are challenges and obstacles, mostly with allocating time, and with safety, supervision, and bullying. However, the principals generally contradict that recess is a challenge to implement and manage and some principals reported that they were not experiencing challenges, which adds to the academic research. Finally, the data collected affirms the academic research regarding policy. Students are mostly receiving time for recess, however, there are discrepancies with philosophy and reality with respect to withholding recess.

As this Capstone and research draws close, it is important to consider what has been learned through both academic literature as well as original research. However, it is also important to consider the potential limitations and gaps in learning, which will be explored in the next section.

Limitations of Research

While there were significant gains in learning in the literature review and survey, it is important to consider the limitations of it. There was a plethora of literature available on many aspects of school recess, including the benefits, obstacles, and policies. Additionally, the survey provided great insight to the current state of school recess in Minnesota elementary schools. However, there were a few facets of this research that were difficult or not addressed.

First, in conducting the literature review, one of my main frustrations was the lack of information on the history of school recess and its origins. I believed that this information would have been helpful in understanding its original purpose and possibly the evolution. But even as noted by Pellegrini, there really is not any documented history on school recess (2005). Throughout this research, I have had a variety of hypotheses on this subtopic, including the evolution of child psychology and various labor movements in history, but unfortunately, nothing that I feel confident with.

An additional and significant limitation of this research that should be noted is the COVID-19 pandemic. I believe that it is especially important to note this, as the pandemic and its incredible implications likely impacted the response rate of my original research for this Capstone. While the pandemic was not at its height during the data

collection period in Minnesota, the education community including principals and teachers were incredibly busy preparing for an unprecedented school year, with many schools preparing for either remote or hybrid classes, with extraordinary health precautions in schools. In some cases, this included changes to teaching styles and methods of teaching, providing technology for students, considering how to provide students with healthy food if they would not be in school for breakfast and lunch, making changes to classrooms and in-school procedures, changing practices for children who are ill or exhibit symptoms in school, and changes to bussing, to name a few. Additionally, the pandemic affected arguably everyone's personal lives, from restrictions on visiting family and friends, to changes in daily routines, to the practice of new norms such as social distancing. Therefore, it would be likely that completing a voluntary online survey may have been a significantly lower priority for elementary school principals, who in other "normal" times may have happily participated. It is possible that had this survey been conducted at a different time, the response rate may have been doubled.

Finally, in reviewing the results of the survey, I noted a relatively minor error with a question that was posed to the participating elementary school principals. The question asked: "What are the obstacles or challenges you face when it comes to recess?" The principals were asked to select from the following options, and could select multiple answers if necessary: 1) Time, academic requirements; 2) Safety and bullying; 3) Supervision; 4) Finance, resources; and 5) Other, which could be filled in by the responding principal. In this question, I made an assumption that all schools and principals were experiencing obstacles and challenges. Based on some of the responses, I

believe that this assumption was incorrect, and I should have added an additional option - Minimal or no challenges. This is evidenced in the other responses, as three principals stated “None,” or “We’re not really experiencing any of these challenges right now.” Therefore, simply due to the literature review and consequently an assumption, I believed that all schools were experiencing challenges with implementing recess. However, this was not the perception of all elementary school principals, which I did not anticipate. This was an important learning opportunity for me as a researcher.

In summary, there were three primary limitations to this research. The first was a lack of historical context to develop an understanding of recess. Potentially, this could have been useful in considering the purpose and evolution of recess. Additionally, a major limitation of this research was the COVID-19 pandemic. While this was unavoidable, this certainly limited the data collection. Finally, one final limitation was an error in a survey question, which did not include a “none” or minimal/insignificant option. This may have impacted the results for this question.

Policy Recommendation

Based on the findings of this research, I recommend that Minnesota amend current state statute to ensure that all elementary school students receive a mandatory twenty-minute recess daily. Current statute states that: “Schools are strongly encouraged not to exclude students in kindergarten through grade 5 from recess due to punishment or disciplinary action” (Minn. Stat. § 120B.026, 2019). This recommendation would be an addition and an amendment to the currently enacted law, as law should continue to strongly discourage the practice of withholding recess for punishment. The requirement

to provide twenty minutes of recess would be only a minimum period, and all educators would be responsible for providing no less than twenty minutes of recess for elementary school students. Therefore, if a recess period is in excess of twenty minutes, or if multiple recess breaks are provided, a teacher or other educator may reduce a student's recess period, however, every student must receive at least twenty minutes of recess. For example, if a school provides a recess period of thirty minutes, a teacher could withhold a maximum of ten minutes of recess, but the student must be provided with twenty minutes of recess. This is not intended to limit teachers in classroom management, but to protect recess for students, ensuring that they receive the multitude of benefits that recess provides. Finally, teachers should be educated on the benefits of recess and provided coaching or training on various classroom management techniques if withholding recess is a common practice.

Recommendations for Further Learning and Research

As I draw close to the research that I have completed, it is important to consider what future research and additional learning could add to the study of this topic. It goes without saying that further learning and exploration of school recess may add to one's understanding of this subject. There are a multitude of paths this research could take, which could add significantly to the development of this topic.

First, as there is practically no archived history of school recess, one possibility would be to conduct a generational study on recess experiences. In conducting my research, I often wondered what school and school recess was like for my grandparents or even great-grandparents. It would be interesting to interview people of various

generations regarding their memories and experiences or lack thereof with school recess. Did they have recess? What was it like? What games did they play? Who did you play with at recess? Did they ever have recess taken away from them? Was recess more physical play or socialization? To me, it would be so interesting to talk with people who went to elementary school in all decades to hear of their experiences and perceptions of recess. While these conversations might still not give a complete history of recess or explain the origins of school recess, it may provide some interesting insights and perspectives on the evolution of school recess, and even child psychology. In writing this Capstone, it has amazed me as to the variety of experiences people have shared regarding their experiences - good, bad, and indifferent - on recess. Therefore, I believe that studying recess through a historical perspective and archiving these memories would be insightful and meaningful.

During my literature review, one researcher was a leading contributor to this subject - educational and play psychologist Dr. Anthony Pellegrini. Dr. Pellegrini's twenty-page curriculum vitae details not only his early experience as a teacher, but also his extensive research in educational psychology and play psychology. He has written five books, and co-authored or contributed to a multitude of other books and articles on school recess and other topics related to play and educational psychology. Currently, he is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Minnesota. As Dr. Pellegrini has influenced and contributed to this Capstone to such a significant extent, I think there is great potential for additional learning in exploring his other works. He has researched extensively the

importance of play for children in numerous aspects, and developing a broader understanding of this could be very beneficial for anyone working with children.

To continue and expand on my original research in this Capstone, one possibility for additional research and learning would be to survey or interview teachers and principals from the same schools. As noted previously, principals are often responsible for creating policies for school recess. But how these policies are carried out and what effects they have in the classroom might be better answered by classroom teachers. For example, a principal may state in a survey that recess can only be taken away as a last resort or withholding recess is highly discouraged. However, a classroom teacher may somewhat routinely withhold recess from students for behavior or other reasons as they find it effective. Additionally, a principal might believe that the benefits of recess are significant and the challenges are minimal, but do the teachers agree with that assessment? I pose these questions for a specific reason. Some of the schools that were included in my survey were schools where I had worked as a substitute teacher. While I do not know if any principals I have worked with responded, and if they did, which responses were theirs, I was somewhat surprised by the results overall. Specifically, the final question which asked: “What is your opinion on teachers and administrators withholding recess from students for academic or behavioral reasons?” Generally, almost all of the answers indicated that it was discouraged or only for specific reasons, but seemed to imply it was rare. However, in my experience as a substitute teacher, this was not the case. Therefore, I see tremendous potential for additional research to be conducted in surveying or interviewing teachers and administrators from the same

schools on policies and implementation of school recess. One may or may not choose to include benefits and obstacles in such a study, or focus solely on policy, specifically withholding recess. I believe this could also provide important information to principals as to whether their policies are being enforced as intended. Finally, if teachers are withholding recess when principals are not aware and not authorizing this practice, this may indicate that additional training on classroom and behavior management.

Also, I believe that it is important to acknowledge and address that our educational system has changed significantly over the past two years, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this unprecedented health crisis, teaching and learning have changed in countless ways. Therefore, it is important to consider how school recess has evolved as well. Research on the changes on school recess and even physical activity for elementary school students during the pandemic is a major learning opportunity. For example, specific to recess, one might consider what did recess and any rules look like pre-pandemic versus today? What safety and health requirements have been implemented in elementary schools? Was there “recess” during any remote learning or was this just forgotten? Do parents and guardians understand the importance of breaks and movement? What did “recess” look like and were any resources provided by schools to engage students? Additionally, there may be significant disparities depending on the region, socioeconomic status, and safety of a child’s home, neighborhood, and school. A more affluent school may have been able to adjust in ways that an inner-city school could not due to resources. Likewise, a child who comes from a wealthier family might have resources available to provide for activities during the pandemic, while a child from a

more under-privileged family may live in a small apartment and not be able to even go outside safely. There are many aspects to explore with the pandemic and education, but recess and physical activity should not be overlooked.

Finally, it is clearly evident that formal policy is important in creating changes when appropriate and necessary. It is also evident from those who have thoroughly researched this topic that because there are important benefits - academic, behavioral, health, and social-emotional - and minimal challenges that can be remedied, there needs to be policies to not only give children recess, but ensure that it isn't withheld. Therefore, additional work and research with these stakeholders and with policymakers is imperative work and should be continued.

Dissemination

As this Capstone is completed and published, it is critical that it be properly disseminated to the educational community. This will be accomplished in the following three ways. First, in surveying and collecting data, a final question asked the participants if they wished to receive a copy of the Capstone upon completion. This question was optional, and allowed participants to enter their email address if they chose. Upon publication, this will be emailed to these participants as a PDF and link for their convenience. Additionally, the link will be "tweeted" as a reply to my original request for elementary principals to participate in my research. Finally, this Capstone will be archived in the Hamline University Digital Commons with other students' work.

Growth of Author

In the culmination of this Capstone thesis, it is important to reflect on the journey and personal growth. Mine might be similar in some ways to others who have completed this path, but also very different as well.

This was my first major original research experience, with an application to the Institutional Review Board, and hoping that principals would respond to my survey. It was also my longest and most extensive paper that I have ever written, both in terms of pages and time.

Personally and professionally, this has taught me a great number of things. Unlike most of my peers, I do not work in the education field, so completing this for me has been significantly different. This is my hobby and passion. Others would note that they would devote their holiday or summer breaks to their Capstone, or utilize their school or classroom for research, but neither of those were options for me. Also, during the course of this, I have overcome great adversity in my personal life and continued, though the easier decision would have been to simply withdraw. I have learned many things about myself and grown in a number of ways, but I think the greatest are perseverance and strength of will.

Final Conclusion

Recess is certainly children at play. But it is also infinitely more. It's physical activity, first friendships, improved cognition and focus, navigating conflicts independently and communicating, listening better in the classroom, taking a break to play a game. Recess may not always be easy for educators to implement. There are safety

and supervision concerns and conflicts that children may need some assistance in learning how to handle. But recess is a unique learning opportunity. It is time we implement necessary policies to strengthen recess programs and give students opportunities to benefit fully from this time. The late Mr. Rogers said “Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”

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APPENDIX

School Recess Survey

Informed Consent - School Recess Survey

This research is being conducted in collaboration with a Master's Capstone at Hamline University. This constitutes the Informed Consent Form, a copy of which can also be obtained by any participant by emailing amcmullan01@hamline.edu. Participants may also choose to print this page for their records.

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The student researcher or faculty researcher (Principal Investigator) will provide you with a copy of this form to keep for your reference, and will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions.

This form provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the study, about the risks and benefits of the study, and about your rights as a research participant.

If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the research team for more information.

You should feel free to discuss your potential participation with anyone you choose, such as family or friends, before you decide to participate.

Do not agree to participate in this study unless the research team has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time.

Title of Research Study: School Recess Survey for Minnesota Elementary School Principals

Student Researcher and email address: Amy McMullan,
amcmullan01@hamline.edu

Principal Investigator or Faculty Advisor, Hamline affiliation/title, phone number(s), and email address: Trish Harvey, Assistant Professor, 651-523-2532,
tharvey03@hamline.edu

What is the research topic, the purpose of the research, and the rationale for why this study is being conducted? The primary subject of this research is



school recess, specifically, the benefits, obstacles, and policies in today's elementary schools. As Minnesota has no legal statute regulating school recess, elementary school principals are often responsible for the implementation of any recess program, with occasional guidance from the school district. Therefore, it is the hope of this survey to better understand the perspectives of elementary school principals in Minnesota with regards to school recess.

What will you be asked to do if you decide to participate in this research study? Participants of this study will be asked to complete a brief survey, electronically through Google Forms, which is expected to take the participant no more than 15 minutes, likely less. Questions will include demographic information, basic information about their schools recess program, beliefs on the benefits of recess, information on obstacles or challenges with implementing a recess program, and current policies on recess in their school.

What will be your time commitment to the study if you participate? Participants will be asked to complete a single electronic survey. The participant should expect to spend no more than 15 minutes to complete the entire survey.

Who is funding this study? As an incentive for participation, there is a drawing for two \$25.00 gift cards. Entering the drawing is optional. Funding for the gift cards is provided voluntarily by the student researcher. No other funding is necessary.

What are the possible discomforts and risks of participating in this research study? There are no anticipated risks or discomforts for participants. However, there may be risks that are currently unknown or unforeseeable. Please contact me at amcmullan01@hamline.edu or my faculty advisor Trish Harvey at tharvey03@hamline.edu to discuss this if you wish.

How will your privacy and the confidentiality of your data and research records be protected? The final two questions of the survey ask the participant if they wish to be entered into a drawing, and if they would like to receive the results of the survey upon completion. Responses for both questions are voluntary. Email addresses entered will be separated from all other data. Any confidential data provided as answers by participants, such as names, schools, or districts will be redacted and will not be used in student researcher's Capstone thesis.

How many people will most likely be participating in this study, and how long is the entire study expected to last? The goal set for participants is 25. We anticipate the survey will be completed within one month.



What are the possible benefits to you and/or to others from your participation in this research study? Expected benefits to student research include but are not limited to knowledge of subject matter, experience in conducting original research, as well as understanding of Minnesota principals' perspectives. Benefits to participants may include reflection and increased awareness regarding topic that is not often discussed, as well as potential to consider or reconsider policies.

If you choose to participate in this study, will it cost you anything? Beyond a brief amount of time, participation does not cost anything.

Will you receive any compensation for participating in this study? As an incentive, participants may elect to be entered into a drawing for \$25 gift cards (2 names will be drawn). This will be done at the conclusion of the survey, and winners will be emailed electronic gift cards. Participants will otherwise not be compensated.

What if you decide that you do not want to take part in this study? What other options are available to you if you decide not to participate or to withdraw? Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate in the study, and your refusal will not influence your current or future relationships with Hamline University. In addition, if significant new findings develop during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to continue participation, we will provide that information to you.

How can you withdraw from this research study, and who should you contact if you have any questions or concerns? You are free to withdraw your consent and stop participation in this research study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which you may be entitled. If you wish to stop your participation in this research study for any reason, you should tell me, or contact me at amcmullan01@hamline.edu or my faculty advisor Trish Harvey at tharvey03@hamline.edu. You should also call or email the Faculty Advisor for any questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints about the research and your experience as a participant in the study. In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at Hamline University at IRB@hamline.edu.

Are there any anticipated circumstances under which your participation may be terminated by the researcher(s) without your consent? None expected or anticipated for this brief survey of school principals.

Will the researchers benefit from your participation in this study? The researchers will gain no benefit from your participation in this study beyond the



publication and/or presentation of the results obtained from the study, and the invaluable research experience and hands-on learning that the students will gain as a part of their educational experience.

Where will this research be made available once the study is completed? The research is public scholarship and the abstract and final product will be cataloged in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository and that it may be published or used in other ways, such as in conference presentations or published in research journals. Participants may request a copy to be sent to them at the end of the survey as well.

Has this research study received approval from the organization/school/district where the research will be conducted? Participants of this survey will be elementary school principals throughout Minnesota. This is not approved or endorsed by any organization, school, or district.

Will your information be used in any other research studies or projects? No - your information collected as part of this research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used in or distributed for future research studies.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

/s/ Amy McMullan 7/14/2020

* Required

By selecting "Yes" below, you have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this Form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. *

- Yes
- No - Do Not Move Forward or Continue



Informed Consent - School Recess Survey

* Required

Survey Questions - School Recess Survey

Please select the option that best describes the region of your school.

*

- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban

How many students attend your school? *

- 1-200 students
- 201-400 students
- 401-600 students
- 601-800 students
- 801 or more students

Who supervises recess at your school? *

- Teachers
- Paraprofessionals or Educational Assistants
- Administrators
- Volunteers
- Other:

Please select the best option for your opinion on this statement:
Recess is a priority at my school. *

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

As a principal, what do you believe are the primary benefits of recess,
for students? *

Your answer

Please indicate your opinion on the following statements. *

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Recess benefits students academically.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recess improves classroom behavior.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recess promotes positive health - mental and physical.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recess provides opportunities for social and emotional development.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recess is difficult to implement and manage.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What are the obstacles or challenges you face when it comes to recess? *

- Time, academic requirements
- Safety and bullying
- Supervision
- Finances, resources
- Other:

Does your school have any policy - formal or informal - regarding recess? *

- Yes, formal
- Yes, informal
- No

If your school has a policy regarding recess, please either link it or copy it here.

Your answer

At your school, can teachers, administrators, or other professionals withhold recess for academic or behavioral reasons? *

Yes

No

What is your opinion on teachers and administrators withholding recess from students for academic or behavioral reasons? *

Your answer

[Back](#)

[Next](#)

Conclusion - School Recess Survey

Thank you so much for your participation! If you would like a copy of your responses to this survey, you may print for your records.

If you would like to receive a copy of the full results of this research and this Capstone thesis upon completion, please enter your email address below.

Your answer

If you would like to be entered into a drawing for a \$25.00 gift card, please enter your email address here. Two winners will be drawn at random.

Your answer

[Back](#)

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