

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: November 12, 2010

Published in Print: November 17, 2010, as **No Recess**

Eliminating Recess Hurts Kids

When Testing Pressure is Too Great, We All Lose

By Nicholas Thache

The suburban New England town in which I run a small elementary school has just been obliged to eliminate morning recess for its public school children. This has, as one can readily imagine, caused a lot of palaver, dissension, anger, anxiety, and finger-pointing. Our excellent superintendent had the unenviable task of moving from one acrimonious evening meeting to another in the opening weeks of our school year, trying to explain why, since standardized-test scores haven't met the designated benchmarks, the schools have been mandated to eliminate morning recess and force the children to spend their midmorning time swotting up on their academic skills.

This is the "trickle down" of the federal No Child Left Behind Act and a commonwealth that takes occasionally justifiable pride in its challenging standards for its public schools. The thinking is that more minutes in the classroom will enable the youngsters to sharpen their minds and raise their scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS tests.

This is not a new idea, but it's a patently boneheaded one—a virtually perfect example (like the [recent anti-bullying legislation](#) cobbled together by the Massachusetts legislature) of why establishing educational policies from on high is a pointless practice, however well-intentioned. It puts me in mind of the safety stickers mandated for child strollers: "Remove Child Before Folding." But this is no joke, and it is definitely not funny.

Any child, parent, or teacher can explain why keeping young kids at their desks from 8 a.m. to lunchtime is a poor idea. Even the stegosaurus, reputed to be "so dumb as to only be dimly aware that it was alive," must have understood the importance of physical exercise. The latest research on learning and cognition, summarized in a [recent *New York Times Magazine* article](#) online, gives increasingly persuasive evidence that exercise and fitness have positive effects on the immature human brain. According to Charles Hillman, a professor of kinesiology at the University of Illinois: "Just 20 minutes of walking" prior to a test raises a child's score, even if the child is otherwise unfit or overweight. The latest studies, using MRIs to measure children's brains, show that fit children have significantly larger basal ganglia, the portion of the brain that aids in maintaining attention and "executive control."

Of course, correlation isn't necessarily causation, and it isn't breaking news—at least in the teaching profession—that children who periodically get

Let's forget the
worship of

[← Back to Story](#)

Let them play it out
before they live it out

TRY IT FOR FREE! ENTER CODE: **edweek**

**WILL
CAMPUS**

Fully Interactive Games that will Improve
Your Teens' Decision Making Skills

a little exercise are apt to be more alert when they return to a less active classroom setting. And good teachers and good schools have for centuries been well aware that more learner-based, active engagement in the classroom leads to stronger academic performance in the long haul.

Tragically, the kids in the public school classrooms in my town are about to learn what the phrase "the long haul" really means. It means their opportunity to burn off calories and energy, to practice the social skills that lead to successful interaction with peers in a relatively unstructured setting, to master the challenge of a long slide or a swing set or simply to take a moment, like Prince Hamlet, to study the clouds or listen to the wind—all of these learning opportunities have been hammered out of their dreary mornings on the anvil of No Child Left Behind. A long haul, a long road, a long march.

I'd like to propose that we forget the pointless bickering, the finger-pointing, the ascribing of blame to this federal administration or that state mandate. This just doesn't pass the proverbial smell test. It's a kind of educational pornography that Justice Potter Stewart would have identified in an instant. Let's forget the worship of standardized testing, however well-intentioned. Let's just consider, for a moment, what school is going to feel like for all the little boys and girls imprisoned in my town's elementary schools, what it's going to feel like for all those teachers who are devoting their lives to the unbelievably arduous challenges of running a classroom.

In other words, let's give them all a break. Their lives—and, ultimately, the increasingly decaying fabric of our national culture—will be the better for it.

Nicholas Thacher is the head of school at Dedham Country Day School in Dedham, Mass. He has been a school principal or headmaster for more than 30 years.

Vol. 30, Issue 12, Pages 26-27

RELATED STORIES

["Recess Improves Student Learning, Principals Say,"](#) (Curriculum Matters Blog) February 4, 2010.

standardized testing, however well-intentioned. Let's just consider, for a moment, what school is going to feel like for all the little boys and girls imprisoned in my town's elementary schools.