

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: February 25, 2014

Published in Print: February 26, 2014, as **More Play, Better Focus**

COMMENTARY

Give Students Time to Play

By **Debbie Rhea**

It seems counterintuitive to think that less classroom time and more outdoor play would lead to a better education for kids. After all, what many in our country, including most recently New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, have prescribed are longer days in the classroom. But longer days on task don't equate to better results. Instead, they translate into more burnout, lower test scores, and more of the same. All work and no play really does make dull boys and girls.

For years, educators have tried different strategies of more testing and of more time on task to reverse these trends, but they have proved to be unsuccessful. The answer is not additional in-class sitting time. What kids need is time to move and have unstructured play.

On a recent sabbatical, I spent six weeks in Finland studying how that country practices education. Reading, science, and math are important in the Finnish education system, but so are social studies, physical education, arts, music, foreign languages, and a number of practical skills. The school day in Finland looks much different from the school day in the United States.

In the United States, for example, a 1st grader attends school 35 hours a week, seven hours a day. In Finland, a 1st grader spends 22.5 hours a week in school, or 4.5 hours a day. Three hours each day are spent on content in the classroom, and another 1.5 hours are spent on recess or "unstructured outdoor play." Some elementary schools in the United States do not have recess time built into their schedules, let alone outdoor recess.

Kids are built to move. Having more time for unstructured outdoor play is like handing them a reset button. It not only helps to break up their day, but it also allows them to blow off steam, while giving them an opportunity to move and redirect their energy to something more meaningful once they return to the classroom.

When a human sits for longer than about 20 minutes, the physiology of the brain and body changes. Gravity begins to pool blood into the hamstrings, robbing the brain of needed oxygen and glucose, or brain fuel. The brain essentially just falls asleep when we sit for too long. Moving and being active stimulates the neurons that fire in the brain. When you are sitting, those neurons don't fire.

Getting students out of their chairs and moving outdoors is essential. A 2008 study **published in *JAMA Ophthalmology*** found that 42 percent of people in the United States between the ages of

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12 and 54 are nearsighted. But 40 years ago, that number was only 25 percent, a change that can't be explained by heredity. Time indoors can weaken our vision, especially if we are staring at computer screens and not looking away for long periods of time.

Additional studies have also shown that when people have inadequate daylight exposure at work, particularly in areas that have poor indoor lighting, it can disrupt their circadian rhythms—the cycle that allows for healthy sleep. When these rhythms are thrown off, it can have a negative impact on academic performance.

I'm such a believer in more unstructured outdoor play and recess throughout the day that I've launched a pilot program called Project ISIS—Innovating Strategies, Inspiring Students—that is being implemented in two Texas private schools, with an additional three public elementary schools in that state coming on board by the fall. While the program doesn't reduce the number of hours spent at school, it does build in more outside recess time. Students get two 15-minute unstructured outdoor-play breaks in the morning (one is right before lunch, the other is a full lunch with a short recess afterward), and then two more 15-minute recess breaks in the afternoon. These schools will continue to have physical education as a content area.

We should not sacrifice recess time for classroom time, and neither should be used to discipline students. The more movement children have throughout the day, the better they will be with attentional focus, behavioral issues, and academic performance.

As a country, we aren't moving—figuratively or literally. Kids' access to physical education has declined in the name of classroom time. For the most part, obesity rates throughout the United States continue to rise, and our country's Program for International Assessment, or PISA, test scores remain disappointingly flat. It's time we got moving, in every sense of the word.

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