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Setting the Tone for September

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We Still Can't Afford to Lose Recess

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When I was a child nearly a quarter-century ago, my mornings in elementary school began outside. My friends and I had the opportunity to play and socialize before going into our classrooms to learn. Later in the day, we could count on another 15 minutes to reboot our brains. We knew that these precious minutes were a chance to talk about things that had nothing to do with academics before we had to sit still and pay attention. We would wait for the ringing bells that signaled a much-needed break in our studies.

But bells don't sound as often for playtime these days. Recess for elementary school (and some middle school) students has diminished over the years or completely disappeared in too many schools. My own 4th grade students are given only 40 minutes for lunch; depending how quickly they eat or how quiet they are, they end up with an average of seven minutes of recess—or no recess at all. Before, they were guaranteed about 15 minutes.

Think about it: They sit for an average of *eight hours* a day with rigorous instruction to prepare them for standardized tests and only *seven minutes* to be active in fresh air. Inclement weather, testing days, and punishments for poor behavior also disrupt recess.

Schools Pick Work or Play

The [American Academy of Pediatrics declares recess a crucial component of a child's development](#), serving as a necessary break from the rigors of concentrated academic challenges (Murray & Ramstetter, 2013). Researchers at Stanford University have also

found that **recess can contribute to a positive school climate** and helps students feel *more* engaged (Parker, 2015). Students even **make healthier choices** about eating when they have recess first (Cornell, n.d.). Experts agree: Students *need* recess.

Yet, as standardized testing increased in the No Child Left Behind era, many schools lengthened instruction time by taking away time from recess, in hopes of improving academics. A 2007 survey by the Center on Education Policy at George Washington University showed that **20 percent of U.S. school districts had reduced recess time**, according to *TIME* magazine (Reilly, 2017). Thanks to demands from parents and teachers, more states are introducing or passing laws to require recess (only about 16 percent had them in 2016), but standardized testing continues to add pressure to instruction time—and play time—today.

Not only is this pressure detrimental to students, but it also makes teachers' jobs more difficult. On the days that my students do not have recess, there is a huge change in their behavior. They become fidgety and try to find any excuse to get up and move around. A pencil, eraser, clothing, or anything else at their fingertips becomes a distraction. They ask to go to the restroom more often. A lesson can take twice as long to complete as it does on the days when students have recess because of their lack of focus. It never fails that one student will ask, looking longingly at the window, "Miss, can we go outside?"

My first thought is, "No, because testing is around the corner." Then I ask myself, "How much am I actually accomplishing if my students are not even listening to me? What would happen if I took my students outside for 15 minutes?" We educators need to ask ourselves: What can we do to help our students get that needed break?

Students Need an Outdoor Classroom

Prime examples of mixing outdoor education and play are everywhere. Countries like Germany, Japan, South Korea, and even the United States have started *waldkitas*, or "forest kindergarten" classes, where preschoolers spend their day out in the wilderness exploring, learning, and playing. According to the *New York Times*, 2003 research by Heidelberg University's Peter Hafner shows that these **kindergarteners were more creative and socially developed** compared with traditional classroom-based kindergarten graduates (Gregory, 2017).

Other programs such as the **LiiNK Project**, developed by Texas Christian University professor Deborah Rhea, are trying to put recess back where it belongs in more than two dozen schools. Districts that pay to work with LiiNK get teacher and leader training in increased physical activity, outdoor time, and character development. After Eagle Mountain Elementary School in Fort Worth, Tex., implemented the program, principal Bryan McLain told the *Washington Post* that **his teachers have more time for**

instruction because kids "settle down" faster—they know they'll "receive another recess before long" (Strauss, 2016).

We have to remember that students are just children, no matter the grade level or age. This coming school year, I plan to have some of my instruction outdoors in hope of restoring some balance between play and academics. I don't want my students to look back on their school years and remember only preparing for tests. I want them to remember exploration on the playground, meeting a new friend on a swing, and running hard and fast enough to lose breath.

I want to smile and say yes the next time one of my students asks, "Miss, can we go outside?" They'll return to the classroom ready to learn.

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