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Recess for Everyone

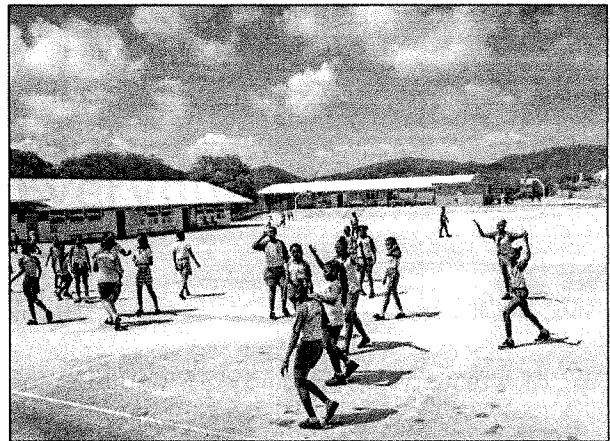
By Kaylen Oliver
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In this text, middle school teachers who now work at CommonLit share their experiences with recess at their former schools.

As you read, identify evidence that shows the importance of recess.

- [1] Recess, oh recess! With so much research demonstrating the importance and benefits of recess, some may be surprised to learn not every middle school has recess as a part of their daily schedule.

Here at CommonLit, our staff is made up of many former teachers, so we wanted to ask our expert middle school educators for their thoughts! What makes recess work well (and not so well) in middle school? How can it be inclusive¹ for everyone?



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Timing: Something Is Always Better than Nothing

The American Academy of Pediatrics² notes that while there is consensus³ that regularly scheduled recess is needed, lengths of recess vary widely, from 20-60 minutes per day. So what's the ideal length of time for recess? The CDC recommends at least 30 minutes of recess per day for elementary school students, and providing middle and high school students "with a period of daily physical activity in addition to physical education and classroom physical activity."

The teachers we spoke with recommend 20-40 minutes daily as an ideal amount of time for

1. **Inclusive** (*adjective*) having as a goal to include as many different types of people as possible
2. the study or practice of medicine for young people
3. general agreement in opinions, values, preferences, or the like

middle school recess. But they also agreed that any amount of time was better than nothing.

- [5] “A small amount of time can go a long way,” says Monica Duckles, a former teacher in DC and Maryland. Duckles taught at a middle school that added recess to the schedule during her time there. “Students had recess at least 30 minutes twice a week. It really was special, it really was such a game changer. Recess days brought so much joy.”

But what if a school is considering excluding recess because they only have a short amount of time? “Even 15 minutes is worth it,” says Duckles, “so don’t feel like it has to be 30 plus minutes.”

Natalie Pfefferle, a former middle school teacher in Pennsylvania, agrees. “Everyone needs a break. With block periods that’s a lot of learning in a small amount of time students had recess time to go and burn some energy. I just felt like we were so much more productive when we did get outside.”

Mix It Up

When it comes to recess, there are multiple ways to structure it. In some schools the entire grade level may go outside at once; in others, it may be smaller groups of classes, or recess may only be one class at a time. Even when multiple classes have recess at the same time, students may or may not be permitted to mix with students in other classes.

Of the teachers we spoke to, the preference was for students to be able to interact⁴ with an entire grade level, where numbers and space allow.

- [10] “In so many middle schools students travel as a cohort,”⁵ explains Dorothy Hodges, a former middle school teacher and administrator. “So you don’t get to interact with folks not in your homeroom except for recess.” Mixing with students from a variety of classrooms gives students more opportunity to form friendships and develop their social skills.

Duckles says this is part of the joy of recess: “Something that really tickled me [is] there are kids who are so different, but they are brought together by their love of basketball or volleyball. This sense of togetherness and teamwork, getting to work with people who aren’t your best friends, those skills can be built during recess time.”

Ensure There Is Something for Everyone

One size does *not* fit all when it comes to middle school recess. Traditionally, recess may bring

4. to respond in a social setting
5. a group of people connected by some factor

to mind playgrounds or a pick-up sports game, but recess can also be so much more! The key to an ideal recess is a balance of options.

“Choice is the biggest thing that comes to mind, balancing the needs of introverts⁶ and the needs of extroverts,”⁷ said Kenan Kerr, a former North Carolina teacher and facilitator. What matters more than the activity is the time. Hodges notes, “Just to have that social time. Students need downtime, they need a chill time.”

There are many organized group sports that are a great fit for recess, such as football, basketball, soccer, and relay races. But it’s also important to have options for individual activities. Outdoor fitness equipment could be ideal for middle school students, who may consider a playground elementary; fitness stations with items such as balance beams, pull-up bars, or guided fitness activity boards allow individual students to enjoy themselves at their own pace. According to a study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, the installation of outdoor fitness equipment in parks and open spaces has been found to increase engagement in physical activities and encourage social interaction. There are also more leisurely physical activities, such as walking a track. And of course, there are the classic blacktop games such as four-square or hula-hooping. Recess can also include additional activities: drawing, reading, board games, clapping games, sidewalk chalk, crafts, or student-created games; whether that is inside or outside.

To Structure, or Not to Structure

- [15] There are a variety of factors that can lead to a need for more or less structure in recess. If a school is entirely new to recess, it might be important to have clearly defined rules that are shared with students, staff and the general school community. If, say recess has been a longstanding practice at a school or a teacher is dealing with older students, then the structure might be a little more relaxed. Older students might not need this same support.

“The 8th graders mostly did their own thing, they had board games they could bring outside, football, basketballs,” Hodges explains. “But with 6th graders, we had to keep it pretty structured, so they chose a station for the length of time. They would more or less stay at that station exclusively.”

While starting with structure is really important to set the right tone, loosening structure over time can benefit students not just in recess, but throughout their life. Duckles shares, “I do think it’s really important for there to be trusted adults close by. You don’t want it to be unregulated,⁸ but I do think recess creates opportunities for kids to work things out, like following the rules,

6. someone who is shy or prefers to be alone
7. someone who is outgoing or prefers to be with others
8. without rules or supervision

and dealing with disappointment.”

It's part of a much bigger question for schools to consider, says Hodges: “How can we teach students to do recess properly because when they eventually become young adults and adults in the world they are going to have to navigate unstructured spaces: whether it's a quad on a college campus or the work lounge. This is where they get the practice.” Loosening structure benefits students in learning to make decisions and manage their behavior.

How can school teams go about this? Hodges explains her strategy: “I've done this with kindergarteners all the way up to eighth graders.” Hodges asks students to think about recess and then share their ideas. She then asks what they think they need to commit to as a group to make sure recess turns out the way they want it to look like. The next step is to allow students to come up with their own guidelines and repercussions⁹ if someone doesn't follow those guidelines. Hodges continues, “It sounds cheesy, but it works.” When students are able to invest in the planning, they are more likely to enjoy all of the benefits of recess.

Gather Student Input¹⁰

[20] When planning for recess, student choices and buy-in is extremely important. Even in a very structured recess, there is room for student input.

Hodges recommends schools “do student surveys to see what activities that students want... It would be great to rotate those thoughtfully, and even think about different seasons.”

Kerr agrees, “There are so many ways to try new things, to innovate, if schools lean into giving students some choice. Ideally, by adding options for how students want to participate. Recess would be the perfect time to lean into social emotional learning through sports clubs. And not even traditional sports, like some colleges do Quidditch¹¹ or hula hooping.”

“Maybe there are students who want to stay inside and instead of going out and playing a physical game, maybe they want to paint, make bracelets, or craft. It doesn't always have to be physical but rather it's a break in the day to decompress,¹² to connect with your peers, and just to take a breather from a busy school day.”

Student ownership of recess comes not just in the choice of activities, but also in managing the structure and rules of recess.

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9. negative consequences

10. information to be used in a project

11. a fictional sport played on broomsticks in the Harry Potter series

12. to relieve pressure or anxiety from one's mind

- [25] “Give students ownership of the expectation. Teach students how to give a friend feedback if they break this expectation, what it looks like to transition¹³ to the next thing,” Hodges shares. “That’s from a lot of explicit¹⁴ teaching, and practicing — encouraging students to own that routine. Students can generate those expectations for themselves.”

Keep the Goal In Mind

There are many lessons in recess beyond simply the brain break. Hodges shares, “The purpose of recess is to help students form social bonds with each other and also learn how to solve conflict together, navigate shared resources, limited resources and all of those social things. Recess is such an important time.”

Beyond the interpersonal skills — the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of recess are vital.

“I’m a former college athlete, and I played all kinds of sports growing up,” says Duckles. “...I really, really think it’s important to get kids out and moving their bodies during the day. Running, exercising, moving your body, endorphins¹⁵ come along with that, I think that’s so important — it does make you happy, it gives you energy. The health benefits are real — for anybody, any age, to sit still for eight hours a day is not healthy.”

It’s Not Just About Recess, It’s About Culture

Recess may not just be about recess. In speaking with educators, recess seems to be an important time to do more than play at school. It builds a school culture.

- [30] Culture-building time can help teachers and students find connections and common ground, ensuring everyone is included in recess: Hodges notes, “Where the school culture was deeper, it’s easier... drawing on some of those things we’d done in class or class-building in advisory — you can pull it out during recess — fostering connection between a couple of students.”

Recess gives a chance for everyone to unwind, and showcase an entirely different skill set. “It was really special to see kids shine... really have a place to be a leader,” Duckles recalls.

So many students feel pressure for academic success, always wanting to have the right answer. Hodges notes, “not during recess. There are no right answers besides be kind and be

13. to move from one place to another
14. clear, leaving no question as to meaning or intent
15. one of several chemicals released in the brain that have a calming, happy, or pain-relieving effect on the body

respectful.”

Whether it's a hula hoop challenge, or making a shot from half-court, memories of everyone cheering you on, “It's such a joyful moment.” Duckles shares, “Being an athlete is a skill that isn't often celebrated during the school day; it's fun when we get moments to celebrate.”

While there may be more than one way to organize recess, one thing is clear: the best recess at any individual school should be designed by those in the school community.

- [35] The more people that can be involved, the better! More choices, flexibility, and using teamwork to design an ideal recess will ensure when the time comes, recess will be memorable, meaningful, and representative of the school's culture.

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