



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Office of Teaching and Learning

# Recess Guidance

Version 01

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## The Importance of Recess

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With the whole child at the center, DCPS recognizes the importance of promoting physical activity throughout the day to support student success. Research shows that regular physical activity increases muscular strength and endurance, improves self-esteem, reduces stress and anxiety, decreases the risk of chronic disease, and enhances academic performance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 8).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines recess as “a time during the school day that provides children with the opportunity for active, unstructured or structured, free play” (10), which according to the American Association of Pediatrics is a crucial component in children’s mental, social, and physical development (Murray and Ramstetter). Recess provides children the critical time to learn through movement, play, and social interaction, which compliments and does not replace physical education classes.

The Healthy Schools Act establishes a goal of 60 minutes of physical activity per day for all children and recommends that schools maximize physical activity by promoting active recess (Council of the District of Columbia 18). To ensure multiple opportunities for physical activity, the DCPS Local Wellness Policy mandates that students have at least **20 minutes of recess** per day, and that recess is not withheld as punishment. In addition, recess provides students with organized discretionary time to engage in physical activity that helps them develop healthy bodies and enjoyment of movement. Elementary schools will schedule lunch after recess periods whenever possible. (District of Columbia Public Schools 8).

### Cognitive/Academic Benefits

Children, regardless of age, need breaks to maximize cognitive processing. Optimal learning occurs after periods of concentrated instruction followed by unstructured breaks (Pellegrini and Bohn 14). Compared to switching from one intense cognitive task to another, unstructured breaks allow children time to refocus and optimize cognitive processing (Barros et al 184). Several studies substantiate the role of recess in increasing children’s attention, productivity, and performance (Barros et al 184).

### Social/Emotional Benefits

Unstructured time for play is essential for the social and emotional growth of children. It sets the foundation for lifelong tools by providing time for children to practice social skills of cooperation, sharing, negotiation, and problem-solving while developing self-regulation strategies (Murray and Ramstetter). Play, structured under adult supervision, can be an extension of classroom learning and enhance the school’s social climate.

### Physical Benefits

Physical activity is essential for the optimal physical, emotional, and cognitive development of children. Recess provides opportunity for children to increase physical activity through self-selected activities that increase movement and motor skills. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, all types of activity, even minor movement, counteract a sedentary lifestyle and help children meet the daily recommendation of 60 minutes of daily physical activity (Murray and Ramstetter).

## Planning for Successful Recess

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### Unstructured vs. Structured

Recess provides students the opportunity to develop social and emotional skills through cooperative play. By providing an attractive, safe space to stimulate free play and a variety of equipment options, students learn to self-regulate the games and their activity (Murray and Ramstetter). This provides a forum for students to develop social skills and an essential break from the rigor of the academic classroom. Initially, students may require adult support to develop appropriate playground negotiation skills and facilitate activities to increase movement. Once playground norms have been established, adults provide supervision and social guidance and allow students unstructured time to play.

### Safety and Supervision

Safety is a major concern for parents, teachers, and administrators. Compliance to the guidelines in Consumer Product Safety Commission's Playground Safety Handbook (43) helps to ensure that playground equipment meets federal safety guidelines.

Students must be deliberately taught to safely use playground equipment, instructed in strategies to create an inclusive play environment, and provided opportunities to practice respectful ways to resolve conflict.

When on recess duty, adults should actively supervise students (not on phones or engaged in conversation with another adult) and be positioned around the play space to ensure that all areas are supervised. In an elementary school, a teacher to student ratio should be comparable to a classroom.

### Duration and Timing

According to the DCPS Local Wellness Policy, recess should last a minimum of 20 minutes (8). This should be the time available for students to engage in play and should not include transition time. To the extent possible, recess should precede lunch. Schools that schedule recess before lunch report a reduction of food waste, a more relaxed cafeteria environment, and an increase in student focus after lunch (Stenberg and Bark).

### Activities and Equipment

Recess is a complement, not a substitute for physical education classes (Public Health Law Center at William Mitchell College of Law 4) and should not impede on space dedicated to physical education classes. As in physical education class, activities should be inclusive and provide students multiple options to engage in physical activity. To promote a positive school climate, elimination and/or human target games (e.g. dodge ball and games where kids "get out") should be avoided.

Both the equipment and space available for play should support active play and creativity. Dedicated recess equipment is distinct from physical education equipment. A variety of playable spaces such as playground equipment, fields, blacktops, and courts allow students the choice to make or create games or engage in an organized sport.

**Recommended equipment for recess**

- a variety of different size and type of balls (e.g. playground balls, handballs, etc.)
- hoops
- jump ropes
- cones
- Frisbees/ disks
- music

Recess kits are available through US Games and SPARK.

## Considerations for Secondary Schools

A break from the academic day is equally important in secondary schools. A variety of equipment and different locations on the campus should be open for students to take a break. Activities in secondary schools may include more structured opportunities for movement such as intramural teams. To ensure maximum participation, schools should schedule a variety of activities open to all students.

## Meaningful Indoor Recess

**Weather Conditions**

Recess will be offered outdoors, weather permitting. If outdoor recess is not advised due to weather, air quality or other considerations, recess will be provided indoors. Children should be appropriately dressed for weather conditions. Air quality risks should be determined by local authorities (Public Health Law Center at William Mitchell College of Law 4).

**Indoor Recess Guidance**

Similar to outdoor recess, a variety of activities should be available during indoor recess. To the extent possible, the recess space should be divided into sections to offer multiple options for students to be physical activity. Resources for classroom-based physical activity are listed below. Other options may include art activities, cards, board games, etc.

**Resources for Increasing Physical Activity in the Classroom**

To meet the recommended 60 minutes of daily activity, all classes should promote movement as a necessary break in the academic day. Below are resources that can be used to encourage movement throughout the day.

**Online Resources**

- <http://brainbreaks.blogspot.com/> This blog includes video demonstrations of some of the activities.
- [http://www.mansfieldtickets.com/files/all/energizers\\_for\\_the\\_classroom.pdf](http://www.mansfieldtickets.com/files/all/energizers_for_the_classroom.pdf) Provides a packet of ideas for classroom energizers and brain breaks. Includes assessment ideas.
- <http://www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com/Energizers/Texts/K-5-Energizers.pdf> Created by East Carolina University, this resource includes ideas for students in grades K-5
- <http://www.coloradoinitiative.org/resources/teacher-toolbox-activity-breaks/> The Colorado Legacy Foundation created a teacher toolbox of tips for implementation, online resources and activities.

- <http://ntprs.org/2013/brain-breaks.pdf> Created by the NTPRS, this resource includes tips for implementation and activities.

### Books

- Kagan, S., & Rodriguez, C. (2000). *Silly sports & goofy games*. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Kagan Pub.
- Ratey, J., & Hagerman, E. (2008). *Spark: The revolutionary new science of exercise and the brain*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Roser, S. (2009). *Energizers!: 88 quick movement activities that refresh and refocus, K-6*. Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children.

### Videos

- <https://www.gonoodle.com/> Includes free, fun movement videos appropriate for elementary students.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMvycnRNIZo&feature=related> Includes tips on how to manage brain breaks in the classroom.
- [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6-3HdnaPwlcQoRx\\_cGikjP0V0W0DLzHm](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6-3HdnaPwlcQoRx_cGikjP0V0W0DLzHm) Video links to several brain breaks that he used in a secondary classroom.

## Funding resources to promote physical activity throughout the school day

Funding for recess is available through public and private grant opportunities. Below are examples of programs providing funding to increase physical activity for children.

### DC Pay Grant

The Healthy Schools Act of 2010 provides grant funding through the DC Physical Activity for Youth (DC PAY) grant through the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE). This grant awards up to \$300,000 per year to schools to increase their capacity to offer physical activity to students before, during, or after the school day. <http://osse.dc.gov/service/dc-physical-activity-youth-dc-pay-grant>

### GO! Grants

PHIT America awards *GO! Grants* to schools throughout America which get children, 5-12 years old, physically active with \$1,000- \$5,000 grants. <https://www.kidsinthegame.org/go-grant-school-activity-grants/>

### Fuel Up to Play 60

Fuel Up to Play 60 grants offer up to \$4,000 per year to qualified K-12 schools enrolled in Fuel Up to Play 60 to jumpstart healthy changes. <https://www.fueluptoplay60.com/funding/general-information>

## Recess Guidelines Checklist

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The following checklist is adapted from “Promoting Health in Minnesota Schools” (Public Health Law Center at William Mitchell College of Law 4).

- Ensure students have at least 20 minutes of recess per day.
- Provide students daily opportunities to be physically active during a recess period.
- Recess will be offered outdoors, weather permitting. If outdoor recess is not advised due to weather, air quality or other considerations, recess will be provided indoors. Children should be appropriately dressed for weather conditions. Air quality risks should be determined by the local authorities.
- Recess, and unstructured time, will complement, not substitute physical education class.
- Recess should not impede on space dedicated to physical education classes.
- Teachers can lead structured group games to actively engage all children and help develop social skills.
- Recess activities promote inclusion and a positive school culture.
- Elementary, Education Campuses, and Middle Schools will have safe playgrounds, recreational facilities, and designated recess equipment available for free play (see list on page 5).
- Schedule recess before lunch.
- A student’s participation in recess or other unstructured time will not be denied as a form of discipline or punishment, or used for instructional makeup.
- Teachers are encouraged to schedule additional recess periods or other activities suggested by students as alternatives to celebrations involving food.

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