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Revisiting Recess Before Lunch

By Dayle Hayes, MS, RD

» How making the case for a switch in school schedules can improve learning environments.



Sometimes called “Play, Then Eat” or “Play Before Lunch,” the Recess Before Lunch (RBL) model is a change in the traditional scheduling order of lunchtime and recess. RBL allows students to go to recess first, and then to eat lunch. The benefits for student health and achievement are compelling and well-documented in schools that have adopted this approach. But, while simple in theory, RBL is often met with resistance. Such a policy change requires careful planning, effective communication and a strong commitment from school administrators and teachers to ensure its success.

It's been more than a decade since *School Nutrition* featured in-depth coverage on RBL. Inspired by the recent publication of an updated edition of *Recess Before Lunch: A Guide for Success* (see the box on page 178), *SN* decided a return to this topic was long overdue.

EARNING ENDORSEMENT In the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child education model developed jointly by the U.S. Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention (CDC) and ACSD (formerly the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development)—and being adopted by many states and individual school districts across the country—RBL is a recommended element. This is due to the multiple connections found between school success, nutrition and physical activity.

But before we dive deep into *those* connections, it's important to note that recess and lunch are also considered important parts of America's current

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food waste conversations. USDA has recognized that schools have a special role in “reducing, recovering and recycling food waste” and specifically has recommended RBL (and extended lunch periods) as key strategies for reducing food waste in schools. This subject is a worthwhile discussion for you and your team. Start by checking out “Trash Talk,” the “To Your Credit” article in *SN*’s April 2017 issue.

To return to the value of RBL from a wellness and achievement perspective, it’s important to remember that nutrition and physical activity go hand-in-hand in helping children to be fit, healthy and ready to learn. As most school nutrition professionals already understand and appreciate the benefits of balanced school meals, we will start our exploration of RBL by concentrating on the benefits of *active* recess.

PRIORITIZING PLAY Although recess has been a hallmark of elementary school schedules for more than a century, some schools have started phasing it out in recent years, to make way for other academic priorities. This controversial move necessitates the need to remind educators and other stakeholders of the important value of recess.

Planned periods of physical activity and play at school (aka recess), have impressive and well-documented benefits. According to CDC’s definition, effective recess is monitored by adults and allows children to engage with their peers in activities they choose. Regularly scheduled recess is a win-win for students and educators because it provides a wide variety of health, educational and social benefits including:

- » increased levels of physical fitness;

- » improved memory, attention and concentration;

- » reduced disruptive behaviors and more time on-task in the classroom; and

- » improved social development (e.g. learning how to share and negotiate).

Regular recess during the school day also contributes to the 60 minutes of daily physical activity recommended for youth today. Based on the strength of research connecting activity to learning, health experts and educators are joining forces to help all students be more active. For example, the Tennessee Departments of Education and Health have joined together to provide online resources for schools, families and communities at its Active Students, Active Learners website, www.tn.gov/education/active-academics.html.

IN 2003, the Montana Team Nutrition Program published *Recess Before Lunch: A Guide for Success*. During the 15 years since publication of that first edition, the *Guide* has been used across the country and around the globe. It has served as the basis for toolkits and programs developed by numerous states, individual communities (such as Vancouver, Canada) and government agencies (including the U.S. Department of Defense’s Healthy Base Initiative

project to reduce the prevalence of obesity at military installations worldwide).

In 2018, after years of working with Montana schools to establish RBL scheduling, the authors revised the *RBL Guide*, incorporating many best practice applications. It is now available nationally to help other schools and districts work to implement an RBL policy at elementary and middle school levels. Visit <https://tinyurl.com/MontanaRBLGuide-SNmag> to download your own copy.



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SWITCH IT UP Active recesses and balanced school meals are good for students in numerous ways. But by flipping the conventional scheduling order of meal followed by playtime to recess *before* lunch, many schools have multiplied the benefits of both recess and school meals. Benefits fall into four main categories and most have been confirmed in a number of research studies published over the past decade.

Improved consumption of school lunch. Studies have shown that children waste less food, drink more milk and eat more fruits and vegetables when they have recess first. The decrease in food and milk waste has been significant in some studies and less dramatic in others.

Improved lunchroom environment. Since students are not rushing to get outside, the atmosphere in the lunchroom/cafeteria/dining area is more relaxed, and thus more conducive to eating slowly. Children are generally calmer, quieter and more able to socialize, as well as to eat their meals.

Improved classroom behavior after lunch. Teachers report that students are more settled when they return to their classrooms and better able to focus. Educators report better learning readiness, perhaps most surprising, they also report small, but important, *increases* in teaching time (even 5 to 10 minutes can make a difference).

Improved behavior overall. Anecdotally, many administrators report fewer disciplinary problems in dining areas and hallways. Some also report that there are fewer conflicts on the playground and that fewer children get sick as they are no longer playing hard right after eating quickly.

As experienced school leaders know, RBL works best when both recess and meal service are carefully planned, especially to ensure that sufficient time is scheduled for both. Are you inspired to take the steps for readying your school or district for the RBL approach? If so, consider the following strategies as your blueprint for implementation.

Go to: www.schoolnutrition.org/OnlinePDAs

“Revisiting Recess Before Lunch”

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1. Recess Before Lunch is sometimes called

- ____.
- Play, Then Eat
 Herd Them In
 Swing and Slide Into Lunch
 None of the above

2. School Nutrition covered the RBL approach extensively in its February 2017 edition.

- True False

3. RBL is a recommended element of the Whole School, Whole ____, Whole Child education model.

- Grain
 World
 Community
 None of the above

4. Regularly scheduled active recess leads to ____ among students.

- increased levels of physical fitness
 improved social development
 reduced disruptive behaviors in the classroom
 All of the above

5. The RBL approach can lead to improved consumption of fruits and vegetables in the school meal.

- True False

6. Stakeholders should commit to the RBL schedule for at least ____ before determining its overall success or failure.

- one week one month
 one semester one year

7. Parents should be advised that RBL is not as effective for students who bring lunch from home.

- True False

8. CDC recommends that elementary students get a minimum of 20 minutes ____ each school day.

- total activity
 recess time
 handwashing time
 all of the above

9. Hand sanitizers are preferred to hand-washing for cleaning hands after recess.

- True False

10. Students in ____ grade levels may be able to accept an RBL change more easily than others.

- 6-7 2-3
 4-5 K-2

TEST COMPLETION & SUBMISSION DETAILS

To earn 1 Continuing Education Credit (CEU) toward SNA's Certificate/Credentialing programs for this professional development article (PDA) test, you must achieve a passing score and the issue date (**June/July 2018**) must not be older than five (5) years from your Certificate/Credentialing period. A maximum of three (3) PDAs per year is allowable for SNA's Certificate in School Nutrition program. There is no maximum of passing PDAs for those with the SNS Credential, submitted within the three-year period.

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EDUCATE YOUR TEAM AND BUILD SUPPORT Involve your school nutrition team at every step of the process. They will be key to the success of the meal service part of the equation. But you will have to engage the entire school community, too.

Educate staff. Start by educating yourself, your cafeteria team, administrators and other stakeholders (including teachers, all aides, secretaries, and custodians) on the potential benefits of RBL. You may want to establish an exploratory taskforce to do the legwork and take messages back to different constituent groups. If possible, visit firsthand, or at least contact, a school district with a similar profile that is using RBL. Share information and discuss concerns.

Ask all stakeholders to make a commitment to give an RBL schedule a fair chance, sticking with it for at least a year. Be ready to make adjustments as needed in the first few months and involve staff in identifying areas of concern and brainstorming solutions. Expect some resistance to change and be ready for the small problems that will arise. Always keep the benefits front and center: More activity and better nutrition enhance learning environments and improve behavior.

Educate parents. Share RBL benefits and links through all the channels that you currently use for parent outreach, including the school menus, the district website, newsletters, bulletin boards, social media postings, teacher conferences and parent advisory group meetings. Emphasize that RBL will be equally beneficial to students who bring a lunch from home. When students have a more relaxed atmosphere in which to eat lunch, they are likely to bring less uneaten food home.

Educate students. Any change in scheduling can be successful if students understand the reasons and the process. Engage student council members or other leaders to promote the new schedule; they can also be helpful in trouble-shooting minor glitches. Request student feedback when appropriate.

CAREFUL PLANNING IS CRITICAL

As you transition from education to implementation, meet with all of the staff involved, especially those directly affected by the schedule change (cafeteria team members, teachers, aides and custodians) to work out any possible kinks. Plan detailed procedures for all related steps.

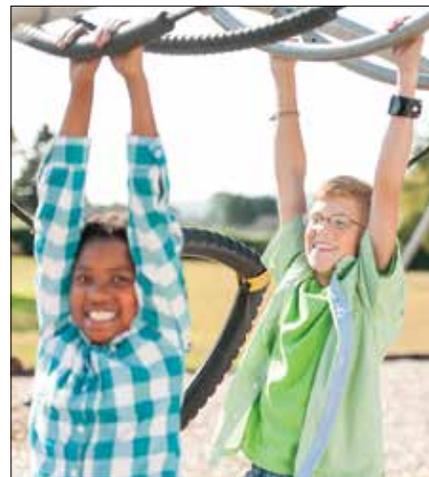
For example, how and when will the brown-bag crowd get their meals from classroom to dining area? Is there a food-safe place to store these during recess? How will you facilitate handling cold-weather gear if kids come directly from recess to the cafeteria? What happens if inclement weather “cancels” outdoor recess?

Be sure you and your administrators allow adequate time for recess, lunch *and* transitions. CDC and other national organizations recommend giving elementary school students a *minimum* of 20 minutes of recess each day. Scheduling at least 20 minutes of “seat time” in the cafeteria is another general rule of thumb. Of course, the actual amounts will vary based on the age and number of students being served; younger children typically require longer to get through the serving line and eat. Maximize time to eat while minimizing time spent waiting in the lunch line by using staggered scheduling and more efficient service models.

Realize that *any* schedule is a work in progress, and it may need to be tweaked several times for different scenarios. Some schools conduct a pilot for several weeks to identify issues and make modifications as needed.

CREATE POSITIVE TRANSITIONS

Anyone working in a school environment knows that transition periods, especially those involving going outdoors, coming indoors and moving as a group into other spaces, have the potential to be disruptive. There are plenty of ways to get students focused for lunch and back into learning mode in the classroom. The key lies in creating structured, orderly routines and providing engaging, calming tasks that work for various grade levels. Invite



experienced teachers and other staff to share their ideas for effective transitions and to mentor other faculty in adopting routines that work.

In general, you should plan to increase the presence of staff, on the playground and in the cafeteria, especially during initial implementation phases. Administrators, other school staff and trained volunteers (such as aides, monitors and education coaches) should spend as much time as possible being visible during the first few weeks of the RBL schedule. Students need to practice new routines and they need supervision during transition times. The presence of adults demonstrates support for RBL and the school meals program, while enhancing the atmosphere of the lunch period. As RBL becomes routine, fewer staff will be needed to supervise.

Pay particular attention to how students are adapting to longer lunch periods, devoid of the stress of eating quickly in order to maximize post-meal playtime. Having adult mentors eat with students and engage in conversations can help.

A key transition that is somewhat unique to the RBL model is accommodating handwashing into your schedule. Handwashing is an important food safety issue and disease prevention strategy. And it is one of most frequently identified barriers to the adoption of the RBL model.

Some school schedules are written so students come in from recess, put away outdoor clothing, wash hands and *then* enter the lunchroom as a group.

Other schools send children directly to the lunchroom from the playground with a stop at the bathroom. In some locations, students are provided with disposable hand wipes or access to a sanitizer dispenser to clean their hands before eating; but remember, handwashing is *the recommended food safety practice*.

You may find that students are thirstier with this schedule flip. Since school nutrition programs are required to have water accessible in areas where meals are served, this is an excellent time to develop a regular process for checking its availability and coordinating any needed replenishment.

THE RIGHT THING TO DO Schools that have been successful implementing the RBL approach urge novices to stay the course. Look past the logistics of the scheduling change and focus on what is best for the students. Since younger students (K-2) may accept the schedule change more readily than older ones, pilot your program with younger grades. Collect and share examples of positive changes seen on the playground, in the dining areas and in the classroom to share with skeptics.

Positive recess and lunch experiences do not happen by accident. Like any other aspect of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model, both require planning and support. Fortunately, there are resources to help schools with this process and many of these have been compiled and made available as bonus web content at www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonus.

If you already serve on your district or school's wellness team, you likely know how well-suited such groups are to advocating for creative approaches like the RBL model, and supporting their development and implementation. Appeal to your colleagues to think beyond the common "herd-them-in, hurry-them-up, herd-them-out" philosophy that has prevailed for decades. Recess Before Lunch is an opportunity to allow school meals their best advantage in nourishing students' bodies, brains and the appreciation of good food eaten with friends. **SN**

Dayle Hayes is a school nutrition and social media consultant based in Bozeman, Mont. Reach her at EatWellatSchools@gmail.com.

BONUS WEB CONTENT

Revisiting Recess Before Lunch

A long list of U.S. government agencies and other national organizations support Recess Before Lunch as a best practice. This month's online extras include links to those that provide detailed information and resources for implementing this scheduling concept. You'll also find a bibliography of recent research published on the topic.

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