Rethinking Recess: Exploring Strategies for Creating Safe and Healthy Recess in Urban Elementary Schools

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The standards-based accountability movement presumes that you cannot improve youth academic performance by “having kids hanging on monkey bars” (as an Atlanta public schools superintendent famously commented to the *New York Times*). Thus recess – like art and music – has been reduced or eliminated in the elementary school day in a misguided response to pressure to improve test scores. Yet, research demonstrates the importance of play and physical activity for children’s development as well as their ability to concentrate and behave in the classroom. More recently, educators and policymakers are recognizing the potential for recess to address childhood obesity and to promote social and emotional learning.

This study is based on eight years of mixed-methods research in schools that self-identified as having recess problems, and it explores strategies for designing recess plans to engage students, improve school climate, support social and emotional learning and promote healthy lifestyles. It reveals that recess design can have substantive impacts even in an ongoing era of school improvement driven by standardized test scores.