



Recess Policy for Elementary School Children

Growing Healthier Kids

Q: Who is the Central Health Equity Policy Council?

- The Central Health Equity Policy Council is a coalition of 60 community partners who advocate for health equity in Travis County with the goal of achieving wellness for all. We envision that all elementary school students have access to unstructured physical activity time or “recess time” every day. By implementing recess policy, schools can help prevent obesity and diabetes, and promote social, emotional and cognitive benefits for our children.

Q: Why is the Policy Council Interested in this topic?

- We want to make sure everyone in our community has the chance to live a healthy life.
- We know that many of our fellow Travis County residents face a lot of hurdles to wellness.
- We also know that the time children spend at school is a great opportunity to form healthy habits that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.
- One of the things that helps them be active and pay better attention in class is recess time.
- Children in lower-income schools don’t have the same amount of recess time as children who attend wealthier schools.
- We know that recess time is good for children, so we want to make sure all children have a chance to get the benefits of recess time.

Q: What problem is this trying to solve?

- Parents and educators are looking for ways to improve children’s educational experiences.
- We are also looking for ways to help our kids be as healthy as they can be – both physically and mentally.
- Depending on the campus they attend, elementary school students may have varying amounts of recess time as part of their day.
- Developing a district-wide policy will ensure that all students can enjoy the many benefits of recess time.

Q: What are the benefits?

There is a large and growing body of research that demonstrates the many benefits of recess time:

Physical Benefits – children run around

- We have seen that students spend more than half of their recess period in moderate to vigorous physical activity – which is exactly the type of activity that helps children stay healthy.

Social & Emotional Benefits – kids interact with each other and come up with their own games

- Promotes empathy
- Builds better self-control in the classroom
- Encourages cooperation
- Promotes building close peer relationships
- Allows for choice and freedom

Cognitive Benefits

- Unstructured play time gives kids opportunities for decision making that stimulates problem solving and creative thinking.



- Improved, listening, attention and concentration
- Some evidence for improved test scores

Q: How will this be implemented? It sounds complicated.

- Fortunately, we have two local examples of how to implement this policy.
- Both Austin ISD and Del Valle have offered to be resources to you so you can benefit from their lessons learned.
- One recommendation is to do an initial soft launch of this policy with a few pilot schools to work out any kinks before a district-wide implementation.

Q: Is there a cost associated with implementing this policy?

- This should be a relatively inexpensive policy to implement.
- Though not driven by a recess policy, some schools already have recess time and use playgrounds, soccer fields and open school ground.
- Some potential costs for schools that don't have a designated space for recess include:
 - providing inexpensive playground equipment (flying discs, hula hoops, beanbags, balls)
 - training recess supervisors to teach new games and interact with students
 - painting playground surfaces or murals for recreation games

The Central Health Equity Policy Council may be able to assist with identifying resources to support these costs.

Q: Is there enough time in the school day to include recess? Teachers have enough challenges with just getting through the academic material.

- An initial soft launch of this policy district-wide is a way to work out any scheduling kinks before enforcement begins.
- The benefits of recess time may help the time spent in the classroom to be more productive so it does not feel like a drain to teachers.

Q: Isn't it up to the parents to allow kids this free play outside of school hours? Why do schools have to do everything for kids?

- Parents and out of school time programs are important partners in our efforts to give our children more time for free play, but the reality is that schools are where children spend about 50% of their waking hours.
- Schools are a place where children will form – or not form – many of the healthy habits they will carry into adulthood.

Q: Why does this need to be a policy?

- Unfortunately, even in schools where recess is a typical part of the school day, recess can be taken away for test preparation and/or for punitive reasons.
- Higher income campuses are much more likely to have recess, while lower income schools are less likely to include recess. A district-wide policy will ensure that all students, regardless of household income, will have time for recess during the school day.



Q: If the policy passes, what will happen to campuses who don't comply?

- The experiences in Del Valle ISD and Austin ISD have taught us that a soft launch is the best approach, so that campuses will have a designated period of time to figure out how to implement this in a way that fits their campus culture before compliance is enforced.
- If a campus chooses not to comply with district policy, enforcing compliance and imposing related consequences for non-compliance with a district policy will be at the discretion of the Board of Trustees and Superintendent.

Q: What if children don't want to be active during recess?

- We have seen that the vast majority of kids do end up being active during recess time, but we also know that the benefits of recess time extend beyond just physical activity.
- Children who choose to engage in pretend play – let's say a group of kids pretending to play "house" or "school" – are still getting the emotional and cognitive benefits of unstructured time: they are practicing cooperation, learning empathy, and tapping into their problem-solving skills that we know are so vital to a successful future.

Q: What will supervision look like? I can see a lot of fights or rough housing happening during this "free play" time.

- Multiple studies of recess found that children in free play engage in very little to no negative behavior and demonstrate very low levels of aggression on the playground.
- However, Austin ISD developed a supervision model which clarifies the training and deployment of supervisors. With a soft launch, the SHAC/School Board can determine what is best for this district.

Q: What would the policy say?

- Elementary school students should be provided with 30 minutes of supervised recess time per day in addition to the 135 minutes of structured physical activity time per week that is currently mandated under SB530.
- All teachers need to have annual professional development on structured versus unstructured time to include:
 - Recess should not be taken away as a punishment or for academic reasons.
 - Recess should not be viewed as a reward but as a necessary educational support component for all children.
 - Recess is not part of the 135 minutes of required physical activity mandated and scheduled into the school day.
 - Recess should not replace structured physical activity time provided through physical education class. Recess is an unstructured playtime where children have choices, develop rules for play and release energy and stress.
- Recess time should be published in the campus handbook that is posted or distributed to parents
- Elementary schools, under the leadership of their principal, should develop schedules that provide for supervised, daily recess from pre-kindergarten through the fifth grade.
- The District shall provide the facilities, equipment and supervision necessary to ensure the recess experience is productive, safe and enjoyable.