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## Keeping Recess in Schools

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### Abstract

*A cross the country students of all ages look forward to recess — the one or more breaks in the school day that allow them to get outside, spend time with friends, and be active. In a school with 300 students, 600 feet will be outside in the physical activity area or playground every day. If students are active for an average of 1,062 steps during recess (Erwin et al., 2012; Stellino, Sinclair, Partridge, & King, 2010; Tran, Clark, & Racette, 2013), that playground could see 318,600 or more steps each day from active students during recess. Over the course of a school year more than 57 million footsteps could move across the playground during daily recess. If students are active half of the time at recess, that is a conservative 29 million footsteps on the playground in a school year. If there is no recess, then there are zero active steps on the playground.*

Recess is a period of time when students at all grade levels, kindergarten through 12th grade, are encouraged to be physically active and to engage with their peers in activities of their choice (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2013). Recess is an important part of an active school (also known as a comprehensive school physical activity program; see Figure 1) by providing physical activity to students during the school day, in addition to physical education and classroom physical activity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013). Although these physical activity periods may not always be called recess in secondary schools, they serve the same purpose: to provide students with self-selected opportunities to engage in physical activity and to take a break from academic work during the school day (CDC and SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2017).

Recess in the United States is not an expected part of the school day, especially in middle and high schools (SHAPE America & American Heart Association, 2016). High-stakes testing and state and federal requirements have prompted well-meaning school leaders to nudge recess off the schedule, replacing it with increased desk time, with little to no opportunities to engage in physical activity and socialization during the school day (IOM, 2013; Murray & Ramstetter, 2013). The purpose of this article is to explain the benefits of recess and to describe strategies to help schools keep

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Disclaimer

The findings and conclusions in this manuscript are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

recess in the school day and to create a culture of physical activity that uses recess as a catalyst for learning.

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## Benefits of Recess

School boards, superintendents, principals and teachers can feel confident that providing recess to students on a regular basis has a positive effect on learning and academic achievement (CDC, 2010). Students who are physically active tend to have better grades, school attendance, cognitive performance, and classroom behaviors (Fortson et al., 2013; Michael, Merlo, Basch, Wentzel, & Wechsler, 2015). When students have the opportunity to recharge, they are more productive and learn better. Recess in schools can benefit students by:

- increasing their level of physical activity (Fortson et al., 2013; Michael et al., 2015)
- improving their memory, attention and concentration (Fortson et al., 2013; Michael et al., 2015)
- helping them stay on-task in the classroom (Barros, Silver, & Stein, 2009; Fortson et al., 2013; Michael et al., 2015)
- reducing disruptive behavior in the classroom (Barros et al., 2009; Fortson et al., 2013; Michael et al., 2015)
- improving their social and emotional development (e.g., learning how to share and negotiate; IOM, 2013; Murray & Ramstetter, 2013).

Although most of the evidence is focused on elementary schools, middle and high school students also benefit from having recess or comparable physical activity periods in addition to physical education and classroom physical activity (Jarrett & Duckett-Hedgebeth, 2003; Lang et al., 2011; Pan, Liu, Chung, & Hsu, 2015). These benefits and opportunities are particularly important for students with special needs, functional limitations, or physical disabilities because they may have more behavioral issues and limited experiences interacting socially with other students (CDC, 2009; Faison-Hodge & Porretta, 2004; Ridgway, Northrup, Pellegrin, LaRue, & Hightsoe, 2003).

Not all students may play vigorously during recess, but it still provides students with the opportunity to engage in activities of their choosing and a chance to practice movement and motor skills. Even minor movement during recess counterbalances sedentary time at school. Recess can also help students achieve the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day (most of which should be moderate or vigorous intensity; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2008).

## The National Landscape for Recess

The 2016 *Shape of the Nation* Report shows that only eight states indicated that they had policies at the state level for recess, and that was only for elementary schools (SHAPE America & American Heart Association, 2016). While over 90 percent of elementary

schools are providing students in grades K–5 with recess for at least 20 minutes per day (CDC, 2015b), schools could improve recess policies by assessing whether their current policies align with SHAPE America's *Guide for Recess Policy* (SHAPE America, 2016). One way to ensure that recess is provided to all students is to include policies to support recess in the local school wellness policy for all grades, K–12. Other national guidance for recess includes the following (CDC, 2011; IOM, 2013; Murray & Ramstetter, 2013; SHAPE America, 2016):

- prohibiting the replacement of physical education with recess or using recess to meet the time requirements for physical education
- providing schools and students with adequate spaces, facilities, equipment and supplies for recess
- ensuring that spaces and facilities for recess meet or exceed recommended safety standards
- prohibiting the exclusion of students from recess for disciplinary or academic performance reasons
- prohibiting the use of mandatory physical activity during recess as punishment
- providing recess before lunch
- providing staff members who lead or supervise recess with ongoing professional development.

Little is known about the prevalence of recess in middle and high schools; however, there is evidence that secondary schools are integrating recess or physical activity periods in creative ways throughout the school day (Edutopia, 2015). These physical activity periods can be led by teachers or students, and they allow students to connect with one another and with teachers in new ways, fostering greater connectedness in the school community (Edutopia, 2015). Physical activity during exploratory programs, midmorning breaks, and lunchtime intramural activities, or as part of physical activity clubs, are all forms of recess in secondary schools (CDC & SHAPE America, 2017).

The CDC currently funds all 50 states through CDC's State Public Health Actions Program to support the implementation of recess in schools and to support school districts and schools to improve recess through professional development and technical assistance. However, efforts and resources available to states to support and promote recess have been limited. If states, school districts and schools are to include, expand and improve recess in schools, schools need evidence-based guidance that can help them customize their approach to recess.

## Strategies for Recess

The CDC and SHAPE America developed *Strategies for Recess in Schools*, which identifies five broad categories of strategies for schools to consider to improve recess (see Figure 2). Each category includes strategies that can be implemented by school staff or by groups in the school that are responsible for leading recess. A total of 19 strategies were identified

under the five categories. These strategies are an integral part of recess planning and should result in increased physical activity, positive behavior during recess, and improved behavior and engagement in the classroom (CDC & SHAPE America, 2017).

### **Category 1: Make Leadership Decisions.**

Leadership and organization are needed to develop a school-wide recess plan. Initial steps include examining existing recess policies and determining how the school will implement the policies. Many state, school district and school policies are not put into practice or monitored. Simply having a policy is not enough. Schools can use CDC's *School Health Index (SHI): A Self-assessment and Planning Guide* to identify strengths and gaps in policies and practices for recess (CDC, 2012; see Figure 3). Strengthening the policies when needed ensures that recess is intentional and is provided to all students.

Another way to ensure that recess policies and practices are being properly implemented is to develop a written recess plan. It is important for a school to identify who will make decisions about recess and lead the implementation process (Chicago Public Schools, 2011). The recess plan reflects the school's philosophical approach to recess and how it is organized. It should address designating spaces for indoor and outdoor recess, establishing weather guidance to ensure student safety, and determining how the school will train school staff and volunteers. These decisions will provide the infrastructure for a customized recess plan that supports the school's unique culture (CDC & SHAPE America, 2017).

### **Category 2: Communicate and Enforce Behavioral and Safety Expectations.**

Schools can support positive behaviors by teaching and reinforcing rules, protocols and expectations for recess, as well as the consequences for not following them (CDC, 2011; Eddy, Reid, Stoolmiller, & Fetrow, 2003). In addition, teaching students how to prevent or handle conflicts can promote positive behavior (CDC, 2007, 2009; Fortson et al., 2013; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). The conflict-resolution strategies used can align with existing school-wide behavioral initiatives (such as positive behavioral interventions and supports), improve social and emotional development, and affect overall academic achievement (CDC & SHAPE America, 2017).

Schools can also establish a routine process for checking recess spaces and facilities and for confirming that they meet recommended safety standards (CDC, 2011; U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2015). Schools should communicate rules, protocols, expectations and safety expectations to students, school staff and parents to ensure that everyone receives the same information.

### **Category 3: Create an Environment that Is Supportive of Physical Activity During Recess.**

Creating active environments for recess enables students to select and participate in physical activities of their choice. Strategies that provide organization to the physical activity areas do not limit the choices students have during recess or create prescriptive physical activity. Access to play equipment such as balls and flying discs can help increase physical activity (Bassett et al., 2013; Erwin, Ickes, Ahn, & Fedewa, 2014; Escalante, Garcia-Hermoso, Backx, & Saavedra, 2014; Ickes, Erwin, & Beighle, 2013; Parrish, Okely, Stanley, &

Ridgers, 2013) and can provide opportunities for students to participate in physical activities of their choice. Schools should choose equipment that meets the developmental needs of students (e.g., assorted sizes of balls and manipulative equipment) and should include items that students with varying abilities, including those with disabilities, can use.

Markings on the playground or physical activity areas also increase students' physical activity levels during recess (Bassett et al., 2013; Erwin et al., 2014; Escalante et al., 2014; Ickes et al., 2013; Parrish et al., 2013). Schools can paint surfaces with lines for recreational games (e.g., foursquare, hopscotch, beanbag toss, number grid) or traditional sports (e.g., basketball, soccer, volleyball) and include markings that students are interested in using.

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In addition, physical activity zones can positively affect students' physical activity levels during recess (Erwin et al., 2014; Escalante et al., 2014; Ickes et al., 2013; Parrish et al., 2013). Physical activity zones divide available spaces into specific areas for different types of activities and provide better safety for students. Zones can be designated by using existing markings or safety cones. Schools can also designate physical activity zones without using markings — blacktops, greenspace and walking/running tracks are easy to identify without markings.

Some students may want ideas for physical activity. Planned activities and activity cards also increase students' physical activity levels during recess (Ickes et al., 2013). Schools can provide options for different activities and activity cards that students can choose from on different weeks on a rotating basis. Middle and high schools can provide access to weight-training facilities, circuit training activities, and gymnasium spaces for group exercise, depending on how the school's physical activity opportunities are organized and supervised. Using a combination of different strategies has been shown to increase students' physical activity levels (Ickes et al., 2013; Parrish et al., 2013). Middle and high schools are likely to use various strategies as a way to use all of their available spaces and to give students a variety of options (CDC & SHAPE America, 2017).

#### **Category 4: Engage the School Community to Support Recess.**

Engaging everyone in the school community, including staff, students, parents and other invested community members, can help recess be successful and sustainable. It is important to establish roles and responsibilities for supervising and facilitating recess. School staff and volunteers have two important roles during recess. One is to supervise students to ensure that they are safe and following the rules, protocols and expectations (CDC, 2011; Murray & Ramstetter, 2013). The other is to be involved and active with students during recess to help facilitate physical activity (Parrish et al., 2013).

Parents and school community members can be trained to help recess supervisors or physical activity facilitators to provide daily recess and multiple recess periods to students (CDC, 2015a). Groups in the school that work with parents (e.g., PTA/PTO, school wellness committees, school health personnel, advisory councils) also can help with fundraising

and promotion for recess. Middle and high schools can consider engaging the expertise of local fitness-club staff to offer free introductory sessions of the group exercises offered at their facilities. These approaches are common ways to engage community volunteers in increasing physical activity among students (CDC, 2015a).

Fostering student leadership during recess is also very important. Students should be able to choose activities they enjoy, not only to increase their physical activity levels but also to empower them to lead activities and encourage other students to join them. Schools can use student leaders to set up and lead recess activities, which allows them to direct their own games, support their peers, and model positive social skills (Ren & Langhout, 2010).

#### **Category 5: Gather Information on Recess.**

Tracking basic information about recess enables staff to make adjustments to maximize student enjoyment, success and physical activity. Careful observation of student engagement can be useful to check whether the available choices are being used or need to be replaced with different options that interest students. This information can also be used to make the case for recess (CDC, 2014). Schools might consider measuring physical activity and intensity during recess to increase activity levels and to meet national physical activity requirements for youth (Hayes & Van Camp, 2015).

School staff can also collect information on recess and its effect on students, including academic performance, student behavior, and other educational outcomes (CDC, 2011; Minnesota Department of Education, 2013). Tracking progress helps schools know if changes are needed to improve recess or the recess plan, and it helps schools identify how recess has benefited students. For students with an individualized education program or a 504 plan, schools can also collect information about how the recess environment is supporting their progress in meeting identified education goals (CDC & SHAPE America, 2017).

#### **Putting the Strategies into Practice**

The CDC and SHAPE America developed a corresponding planning guide for the *Strategies for Recess in Schools* called *Recess Planning in Schools: Putting the Strategies for Recess into Practice*. This recess-planning guide helps schools develop a written schoolrecess plan and integrate the strategies throughout the development process. Schools can customize what is included in the recess plan to reflect the existing priorities of the school and make recess decisions that support the unique school culture.

Schools can identify what is already in place for recess and select targeted recess strategies that they are interested in implementing during the school year. Schools may choose to incrementally address recess strategies, depending on what is feasible or needed at the school, and use the listed resources to inform their plans. By mindfully planning the infrastructure for recess, schools intentionally create opportunities for physical activity that includes student choice, addresses social and emotional learning, and supports academic outcomes through a student-centered approach.



## Summary

Schools are in a unique position to integrate physical activity through daily recess as an integral part of a healthy school environment for students at all grade levels. Evidence shows that students can benefit from having physical activity periods during the school day, in addition to physical education and classroom physical activity. New resources from the CDC and SHAPE America can support schools in planning for recess and implementing strategies that can increase student physical activity levels; improve their memory, attention and concentration; help them stay on-task in the classroom; and improve their social and emotional development.

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A comprehensive school physical activity program (CSPAP) is a multi-component approach by which school districts and schools use all opportunities for students to be physically active, meet the nationally-recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day, and develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to be physically active for a lifetime.

(CDC, 2013)

**Figure 1. Definition of a comprehensive school physical activity program**

## Strategies for Recess in Schools

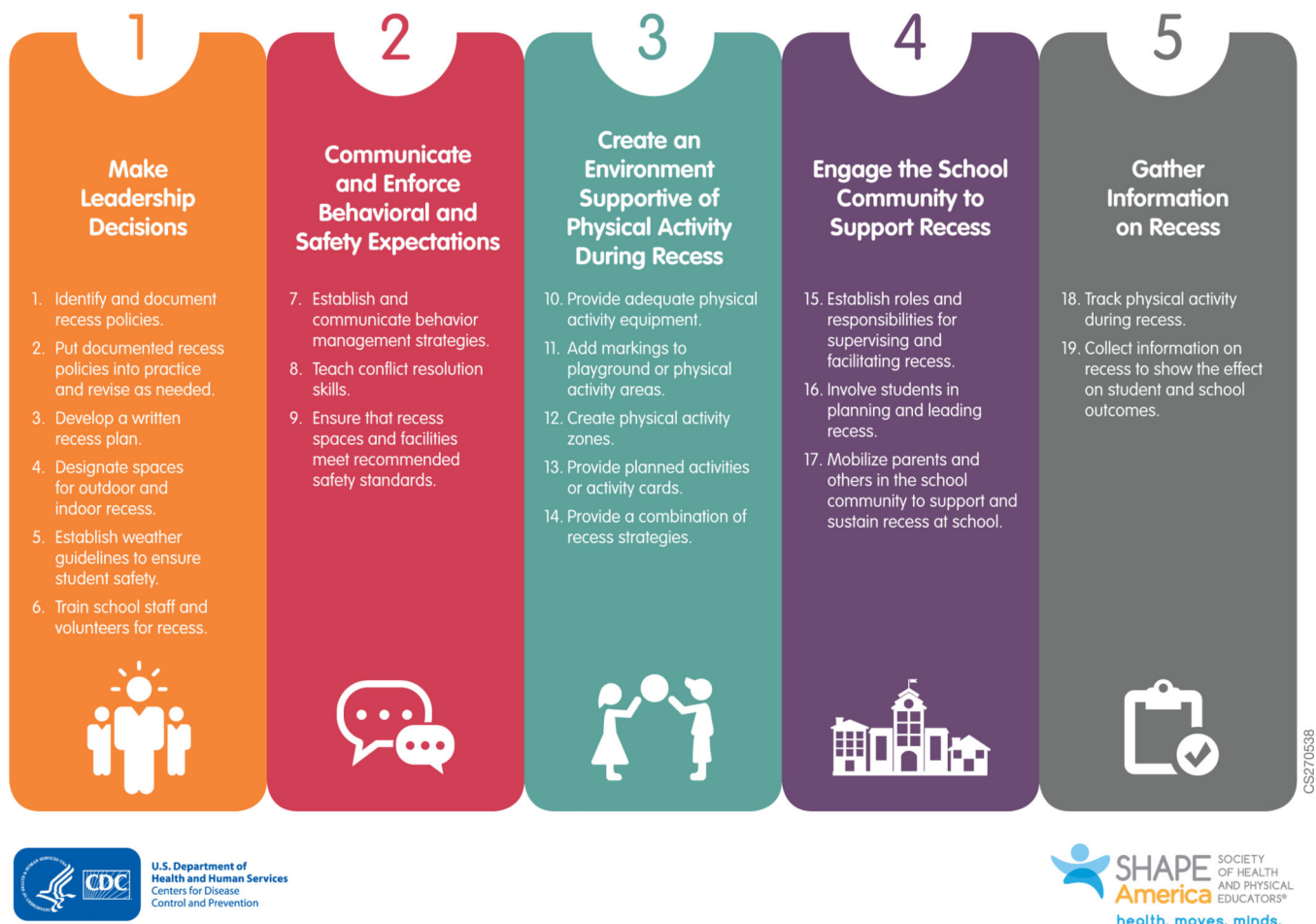


Figure 2. Strategies for recess in schools

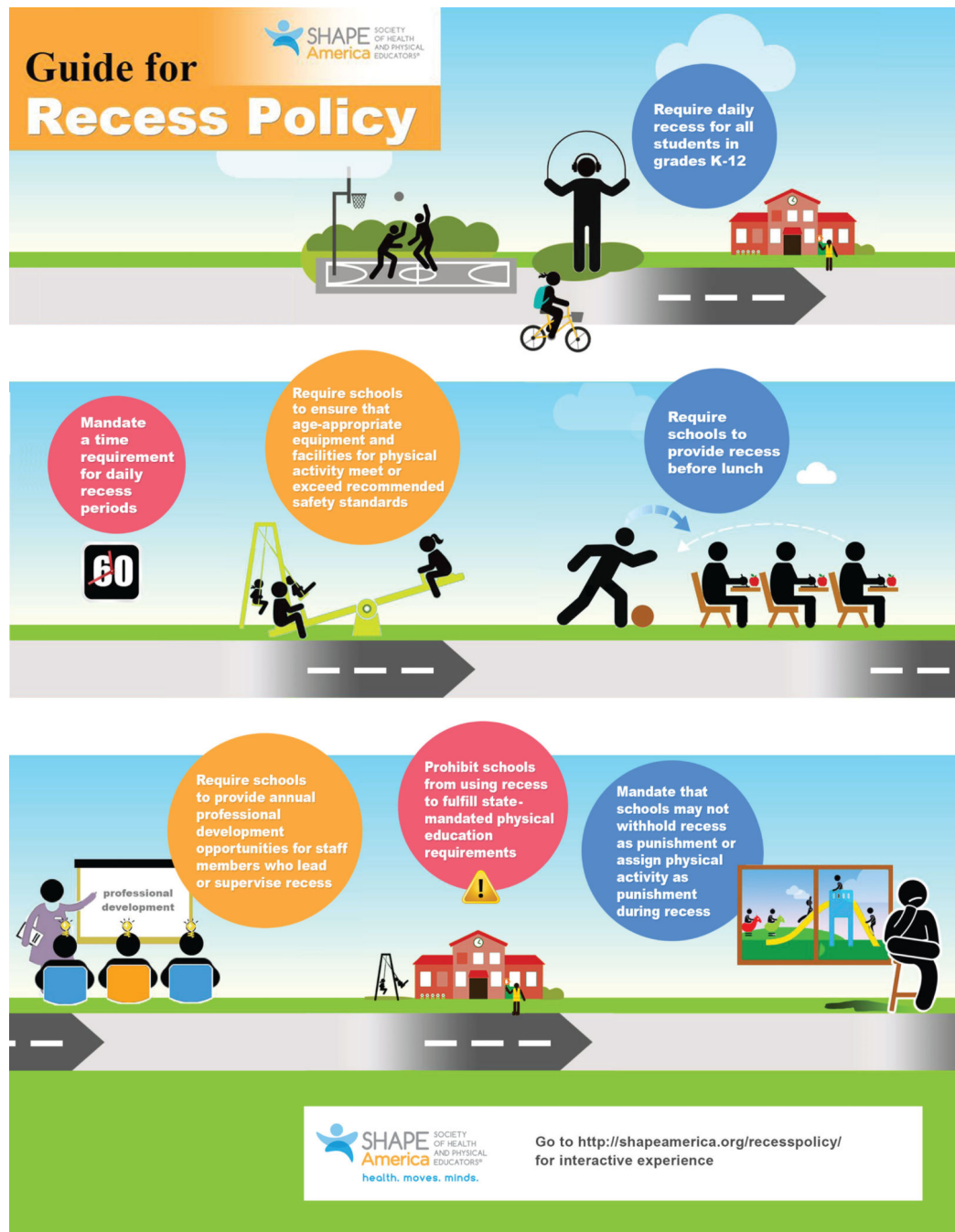


Figure 3. Guide for recess policy