

EDUCATORS TOUT BENEFITS OF RECESS

By Ashley Rhodebeck • October 14, 2011



Wasco Elementary School second-grader Paige Kucyk (center) jumps rope Thursday with classmates Samantha Harbeck (left) and Kaytlyn Paul (right) during an indoor recess at the school.

Recess isn't just fun and games.

Those minutes of unstructured play not only get children active, but the time also helps improve their focus for the classroom, helps them develop their gross motor skills and gives them a chance to learn social skills, such as following rules and relating to their peers, local educators said.

“So much research is available these days about the benefits associated with learning and activity. It’s just critical,” said Patty O’Neil, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction at Geneva School District 304.

Educators and administrators with St. Charles School District 303 and Batavia Public Schools District 101 share O’Neil’s views. They said all the public elementary schools in the Tri-Cities incorporate recess into the school day – an activity the National Association for Sport and Physical Education says elementary schools should provide 20 minutes daily.

Play, however, isn’t confined to recess. Students in middle and high school generally don’t get recess, but they might engage in intellectual play, local educators said.

“The reality is you need play to learn,” said Tony Inglese, the chief information officer for Batavia schools.

PLAY FOR THE BRAIN

Sure, recess can help curb childhood obesity, said Jean Williams, a wellness educator at Wasco Elementary School in District 303. But when discussing the benefits of that playtime, she first noted how it increases oxygen flow to the brain. After recess, she said, students are less fidgety, exhibit less off-task behavior and are more focused, ready to learn.

“It improves their cognition, so they’re more ready to learn and helps with the absorption process of knowledge,” her colleague, wellness educator Will Navis, said.

The brain-body connection is strong enough that educators are tying movement with learning.

Last year, a class at Wasco was struggling in certain areas, so Williams said she set up different stations that paired academics – math flash cards and spelling words, for example – with physical activities, such as jump rope.

At Batavia High School, students about to take the state exams last spring were given the option to

participate in a brain boot camp that offered activities like volleyball and badminton. Brad Newkirk, the district's chief academic officer, said these activities were intended to prepare the brain for the test.

"The physical education teachers had T-shirts [that said], 'Your brain on exercise,'" Newkirk said. "It was a clever, creative way to get them ready."

BUILDING CONFIDENCE, SOCIAL SKILLS

It's understandable if visitors to the Goddard School in St. Charles think students are just playing. After all, owner Anisa Ali said, the school has a play-based curriculum.

"It helps interest them more because they have more choice and more freedom," she said. "They can take the curriculum in the direction they want to take it."

For example, she said, a creative arts activity might have students make collages out of tongue depressors, bandages and Q-tips after learning about doctors. Their ability to choose the materials and decide the look of their artwork is important because it helps build self confidence and self-esteem – skills that can make children more willing to try new things, Ali said.

Playtime also lets children develop their imagination, conquer their fears while practicing adult roles, learn how to work in groups, discover their interests and express their views and frustrations, according to a 2007 clinical report from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

"I think that parents are still realizing how important early childhood education is and the importance of play in that early childhood program," Ali said.

ENGAGING STUDENTS

Play isn't limited to recess. In fact, the 2011 Horizon Report – a collaboration between The New Media Consortium and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative that looks at emerging technologies in education – predicts the rise of game-based learning in the next two to three years, said Inglese, Batavia's chief information officer.

"It's not just about being more fun," Inglese said. "What we struggle with is really engaging students."

Games with real-world scenarios could show students the relevance of subjects, such as calculus, in their lives, he said. Other games might have students imagine they are part of a global oil crisis and instruct them to collaborate with each other to solve problems and make decisions, he said.

"Games are just one more tool," Inglese said.

MAKING TIME FOR PLAY

Although school officials in the Tri-Cities said the amount of recess time hasn't changed much in recent years, the American Academy of Pediatrics reported in 2007 that "time for free play has been markedly reduced for some children."

Playtime is being reduced to make way for more academics, more organized activities and more enrichment videos and computer programs, the academy reported.

"Parents are receiving carefully marketed messages that good parents expose their children to every opportunity to excel, buy a plethora of enrichment tools and ensure their children participate in a wide variety of activities," according to the report.

