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Nutrition for Health



RECESS BEFORE LUNCH

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In most elementary and middle schools, students file into the cafeteria to eat lunch and then have recess. Often, students hurry through their meals in order to have a longer recess. This leads to wasted foods and rushed eating. In recent years, interest has been raised to schedule recess before lunch. Illinois students consumed more milk, vegetables, fruit, and meat when they had recess before lunch¹. Montana conducted a pilot project with 4 schools to assess the impact on food and beverage waste as well as the acceptance of the policy by school staff and students². Overall, school staff members were supportive.

When recess was before lunch, students:

- Wasted less food
- Ate in a more relaxed cafeteria atmosphere
- Behaved better on the playground, in the cafeteria, and in the classroom
- Had more instructional time when they went back to the classroom immediately after lunch because they were ready to learn and time was not lost calming the students
- Were more focused in the classroom during the afternoon

Several issues should be considered if your district or school is thinking about changing recess:

- Enlist support by providing information to the school faculty and staff, parents, students, and the community about the reasons for the change.
- Schedule adequate time (25-30 minutes) for students to eat.
- Develop protocols for the following if needed:
 - o Going to recess, coming in from recess and going to lunch, and going from the lunchroom back to the classroom
 - o Hand washing
 - o Access to water
 - o Getting sack lunches
 - o Keeping lunch money/PIN cards safe
- Practice your new routine so everyone knows what to do and when to do it.
- Schedule a trial period to work through any issues that might arise.
- Talk with other schools/districts that have changed their recess.
- Keep records and document the improvements that are obtained. Such data will be helpful to use in school/district reports.

Dr. Cullen is an expert in health promotion and education, specifically student lunch selection and food sales in schools. She currently is evaluating the effect of Texas school food policy changes on food selection in middle schools.

Resources

1 Getlinger MJ, Laughlin VT, Bell E, Akre C, Arjmandi BH.

Food waste is reduced when elementary-school children have recess before lunch. J Am Diet Assoc. 1996 Sep;96(9):906-8.

2. Montana team Nutrition Program. Recess Before Lunch Policy: Kids Play and then Eat! Available at <http://opi.mt.gov/schoolfood/recessBL.html>

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