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You're Not Really Thinking of Taking Away Recess, Are You?

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on June 7, 2013 6:16 AM

Saturday, June 1st became a kind of running-focused day for me. I began my morning by watching the [Freihoffer's Run for Women](#) in Albany, NY. The Freihoffer's Run brings together over 5,000 women every year. Some of the best runners in the world share the road with average runners and walkers.



The second running experience came that day when I watched the [Prefontaine Classic](#) on NBC. Fortunately for me, I watched high school junior Mary Cain set a national record running the 800 meters in 1:59:51. If you're not a runner....let's just say there are thousands of high school and college male runners who would love to break 2 minutes for the 800 meters. And the fact that this high school student ran with Olympic and professional athletes is beyond amazing.

For many people, running is one of those sports where the world goes away. No matter how tough the day may be, runners can break away from the bad day and clear their head through a long run. And finishing a race, whether it's a national record in the half mile or finishing a 3.1 mile run with 5,000 other women, is an accomplishment.

Which leads to our students...

Taking Away Recess

There is a growing national issue with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, increased accountability and longer and more rigorous state assessments. Many schools are responding by taking away recess in order to provide more academic time for students.

[Bornstein](#) says,

"In response to the No Child Left Behind act, nearly half of all school districts in the country have shifted large chunks of time to math and reading instruction in order to improve student test scores. What's been cut? Art, music, social studies and recess. The last has been particularly hard hit. On average, American kids get only 26 minutes of recess per day, including lunchtime -- and low income kids get less than that."

Just like with running and breaking away from the monotony of the day, our students need a brain break from academic time. They are not machines that we should keep feeding more data. They are human beings who need to experience fresh air, social interaction, and the time to indulge in creative play.

According to another **N.Y. Times** article, *"Research suggests that play and downtime may be as important to a child's academic experience as reading, science and math, and that regular recess, fitness or nature time can influence behavior, concentration and even grades."*

Playworks

According to **Playworks**, a national non-profit that reduces bullying and conflicts and improves school climate says, *"Despite shrinking budgets, schools are faced with the challenge of boosting academic performance while also having to address the social, emotional, and physical needs of students. Recess and other school-based playtime are some of the least studied elements of the school day. Elementary school principals and teachers often say, however, that as goes recess, so goes the school day."*

As a school principal, I understand the pressures of increasing academic performance. Accountability and mandates feel like they are stifling our creativity. However, to give up recess and other physical activity is a mistake. We cannot lose sight of the fact that our children need downtime during the day as well as after school when they get home. We need to foster more Mary Cain's in the world, not stifle them.

In a child's world, a great kickball game, a game of 4-Square or tag is just as important as what they are doing inside of school. The playground provides students with an opportunity to meet new friends and learn to play new games. Recess has long been the place where I can watch students interact and the conversations they have with me out on the field helps to build a bond. There are benefits to recess for both students and adults.

It's no wonder that, *"A randomized controlled trial conducted by experts at Mathematica Policy Research and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University examines how investing in recess and organized play through a program called Playworks benefits both teachers and students during the school day."*

Playworks suggest the following:

- Develop a whole school approach to provide at least 30 minutes per day of vigorous to moderate physical activity, including:
 - A high quality physical education program
 - Recess, physical activity in the classroom and other in-school opportunities
 - Active transportation to/from school
 - Before/after school programming available to all students
 - Intramural and extramural sports for all students.
- Consider access to physical activity in school policy decisions
- Designate physical education as a core subject
- Assess and monitor physical education and physical activity in school
- Provide professional development opportunities for classroom and physical education teachers
- Ensure all students have equal access to facilities and opportunities for physical activity and quality physical

education.

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