

Better Recess for a Better School Experience: West Philadelphia Recess Initiative

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Introduction

As a district focused intently on improving standardized test scores, the School District of Philadelphia has many elementary schools where time for outdoor play is limited, and where students do not have adequate access to high-quality recess. West Philadelphia Recess Initiative, a partnership of the University of Pennsylvania and two elementary schools in the School District of Philadelphia, responds to children's need for recess and play during the school day, which provides health, academic and social benefits for the students. Through this program, University of Pennsylvania students assist lunchtime aides during recess periods at Lea and Wilson Schools in West Philadelphia, helping to make recess more organized and fun for the children, while concurrently giving undergraduate students a new perspective on urban education.

The Problem: Too Little Time for

Recess

At Henry C. Lea Elementary School and Alexander Wilson Elementary School in West Philadelphia, as well as in the School District of Philadelphia overall, there has been too little time devoted to children's recess during the school day, leaving students with fewer opportunities to exercise, play and participate in fun and organized outdoor activities. Often, these under-resourced schools are overwhelmed with the number of children they have to manage during lunch each day, and do not have enough staff or support to allow all students to have adequate recess time. Concerns about schoolyard conflicts and disciplinary issues compound the issue. In addition, there has been an overall need to simply improve the lunchroom environment. In some schools, children only get a few minutes, if any time at all, to play outside, depriving them of the full chance to play, expend their energy, and engage in physical and social activities outside.

The Solution: West Philadelphia Recess Initiative

A partnership between the University of Pennsylvania and Henry Lea and Alexander Wilson Elementary Schools in West Philadelphia, West Philadelphia Recess Initiative is a program that recruits undergraduate volunteer, service learning and work-study students to organize games and activities during recess at Lea and Wilson Schools, so that

the children have a pleasant recess where exercise is maximized and bullying is minimized. The idea originally grew out of a political science service-learning course taught by University of Pennsylvania professor Mary Summers, who wanted to partner with school staff and colleagues at the Graduate School of Education (GSE) to develop school-based placements for her students that would help them understand issues in urban education. Working with Christopher Dean, a GSE graduate student who facilitated the development of a local school health council, she found that recess was a time when local elementary schools could use students' support. Professor Summers continues to partner with Dr. Caroline Watts, a GSE faculty member, in supporting the Recess Initiative.

Managed by Penn's Office of Community School Student Partnerships, West Philadelphia Recess Initiative places undergraduate students under the supervision of a school-based recess supervisor at Lea and Wilson Schools on weekdays to help organize recess activities and assist the lunchtime staff in handling the children during recess (teachers do not work with students during lunch). The undergraduates make sure every child is lined up to go outside and go back inside, organize games for the children, and respond to the children's and aides' needs at recess. Their assistance is of tremendous help to the school staff, who have many responsibilities and students to juggle during the lunch hours. (Lea, located at

47th and Sansom Streets, has three different recesses, while Wilson, located at 46th Street and Woodland Avenue, has two.)

The initiative is impactful in many ways. With the organized games that children play at recess, not only do students get to have more fun, but there are also fewer incidents of conflict and injuries on the playground. "A fair amount of research says that having organized games and things to do is key. . . .The amount of bullying and fighting that decreases is quite extraordinary," reports Summers. With more eyes on the elementary school students, lunchtime aides can feel more comfortable giving them more time outdoors. And with more hands, the staff is able to transition students more quickly to and from lunch and recess, making the entire process more efficient.

Previously, students as young as five years old were only getting about five minutes outside. Summers reports that research indicates that 20 minutes of recess time is the minimum amount of time needed to make a positive difference in children's behavior during the school day. Now, with the Penn undergraduates participating in this program five days a week at the two schools—each student usually works one or two days a week—the children are better able to get the most out of their 40-minute lunch period by spending 20 minutes eating their lunch and 20 minutes playing outside. Additionally, anecdotal evidence from the school nurses suggests

there have been fewer fights since the initiative began.

The undergraduate students are forming good relationships with the children, creating a bond and sense of mutual trust. If the children have developed a good connection with the Penn students, recess time becomes more enjoyable and functions more smoothly for everyone.

How the Initiative Is Innovative

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West Philadelphia Recess Initiative is innovative on various levels. First, it forms a strong foundation of higher education and K–12 school partnerships. Many universities in the United States, particularly those located in urban areas, look for ways to interact with and engage their local communities and neighborhood schools. This program is an effective partnership that benefits the health and well-being of young children, many of whom are from low-income families, and allows college students to develop relationships with the surrounding community.

Secondly, the initiative has a positive impact not only on the elementary school students, but also on the college students, allowing them to see first-hand how a local public elementary school is run, how great the need is for more resources within these schools, the challenges the children and staff face each day, and how their support

can make a difference. Through this program, Penn students come face-to-face with a Philadelphia public elementary school's infrastructure, equipment and cafeteria food, along with the aides, teachers and administrators who work there. "This generation [of young adults] is concerned with the growing inequality and ongoing segregation in American society," Summers says. "If a student has a positive experience working in a neighborhood school, it is tremendously empowering." Some of the past participants have even gone on to pursue further education or work in urban education after graduating from Penn.

Another benefit of the creation and success of this program is the attention it can bring to the importance of recess. Professor Summers notes that research has shown that youth who have had recess during the day are able to focus better in the classroom for the remainder of the school day: "When there's a good recess, kids get so much more out of the day; research says that kids get 45 more productive minutes of learning. . . ." So much government and media attention to public education has focused on the No Child Left Behind testing and the need to raise standardized test scores that recess and play time have been neglected. On the public and policy levels, the work of West Philadelphia Recess Initiative can call attention to the fact that test scores are not the only important factor in children's success in school.

The Future for Recess

West Philadelphia Recess Initiative is still in its early stages, and its leaders hope to develop a deeper understanding of which aspects of the partnership are necessary for success. Program supervisors have been working to develop more extensive training and orientation for students participating in the program, and Professor Summers stresses the importance of understanding how the school works before jumping in. Down the road, the initiative hopes to gain funding for additional research into the program's most effective elements and methods of program evaluation, which could confirm anecdotal evidence of the initiative's impact on students and the school culture.

A small group of faculty at Penn is currently looking at the elements of the partnership that are most critical to this work. Students from Summers' Healthy Schools class are also now working with the Playworks program, a national initiative to promote healthy play and recess, which began partnering with 12 Philadelphia schools this year, to explore further options for developing university/school partnerships that can serve to enhance school recess programs and undergraduate education. As West Philadelphia Recess Initiative expands its reach in the future, it will continue to enhance opportunities for Philadelphia's schoolchildren to have meaningful playtime.

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