

# The Importance of Recess in California Elementary School Reopening

Rebecca A. London



**A**s California's elementary schools reopen after prolonged physical closure due to COVID-19, attention to healing the school community will be essential. Although there is wide variation in the timing and formats with which schools plan to reopen, it is clear that when students reenter school buildings they will be eager to reconnect with friends and teachers. Because elementary school-aged children learn and grow through play, recess is an ideal time to support healing and to prepare students to return to the classroom ready to learn. When students are allowed to reenter school buildings, providing opportunities for play should be a priority; this brief discusses how schools can safely implement recess and harness the power of play to rebuild the school community and support the well-being of their students.

January 2021

---

## Recess Is Essential for Student Healing

If you ask children what they have missed most about school during remote learning due to COVID-19, they invariably say their friends, and then their teachers.<sup>1</sup> School is much more than a place for teaching and learning. Prior to March 2020, schools and all their inhabitants formed a community that was accustomed to interacting 5 days a week, for 6 or more hours at a time. The abrupt end to the school routine and its accompanying social isolation—which has now stretched longer than anyone anticipated—has created distress and unease for students, families, teachers, administrators, and other staff. Added to this are the compounding potential adverse childhood experiences that have accumulated for the most vulnerable young people, who have experienced food and housing insecurity, financial insecurity, abuse and neglect, fear, and loneliness. When schools reopen, it is essential to focus on healing and reconnecting the school community before the business of teaching and learning can resume.<sup>2</sup>

Some California elementary schools have already reopened, and many others are still working with a variety of scenarios for potential school reopening. Students are experiencing and will continue to experience a variety of changes to their school day including staggered schedules, smaller classes, and a combination of in-person and distance learning. When students are physically at their schools, recess is the ideal place for them to reconnect with their community and heal from their distress. It is the only time in the elementary school day that is intentionally unstructured and simultaneously attends to students' social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development. It is also the primary opportunity for play during the school day, which decades of research has shown is essential for learning.<sup>3</sup> Play is so important for children that a child's right to play is protected by the United Nations.<sup>4</sup> Professional health organizations—including the American Academy of Pediatrics and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—endorse the importance of recess because of its role in supporting whole-child development.<sup>5</sup>

---

**“ After ‘socially isolating’ for a number of weeks—heaven forbid months—one could argue that resocializing children through regular recess should be a top priority.”<sup>6</sup>**

ANDREW GARNER, MD, FELLOW OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

---

Although school administrators may find it tempting to eliminate recess on days when students are physically present at school in order to focus on other priorities, the evidence does not support this approach. Even with the need to address important learning losses due to remote learning and the digital divide, **providing recess every day for every child when they are physically at school should be a priority.** At this crucial moment, we must support student health and well-being; access to recess at school is essential for healthy child development, particularly for the most vulnerable.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, not all recess is created equal. For recess to have its intended effects, it must be designed with attention to safety, inclusion, and fun; all participants—both children and adults—should be prepared to engage during this time. This brief lays out the case for recess as a place for healing when schools reopen and explores ways to address concerns about equity, isolation, bullying, and virus spread.

## High-Quality Recess Supports California’s Educational Goals

A key goal of public education in California is equity: to ensure “a world-class education for all students.”<sup>8</sup> State policies address this goal through multiple avenues, including what some might view as nonacademic goals—especially those related to school climate. California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) priorities already focus on important social-emotional metrics, including student safety (emotional and physical) and connectedness, as part of the school climate priority area. School climate is generally thought to include components such as a sense of belonging or connectedness to peers and adults; physical and emotional safety; support for academic learning; and an institutional environment that fosters school connectedness and engagement. It is more important than ever to pay attention to school climate as we transition from remote to in-person teaching and learning because, in addition to being important for positive child development and health promotion, school climate is a key contributor to students’ academic success.<sup>9</sup>

Although educators and parents may be concerned about learning loss, the American Academy of Pediatrics cautions that jumping into academic programs before attending to students’ social and emotional needs can exacerbate students’ and teachers’ distress, especially at a time when extra support is warranted.<sup>10</sup> Recess has always been a key unstructured time for connection. A well-designed recess can elicit a host of positive outcomes, including improved classroom attention and behavior,<sup>11</sup> positive relationships with others<sup>12</sup>—including capacity to manage emotions and to demonstrate respect and empathy for others—and reduced conflict and bullying on the play yard. Together these lead to enhanced learning for students<sup>13</sup> and improvements in overall school climate.<sup>14</sup> For students who do not have access to regular recess, there is a lost opportunity for the crucial benefits of play.<sup>15</sup> However, especially in this current context, extra efforts need to be taken to ensure that recess is a positive time for students. This includes health and safety protocols as well as efforts to ensure that recess does not provide a space for bullying, exclusion, and boredom.<sup>16</sup>

## Lessons About the Importance of Recess From Before the Pandemic

It is always important to plan for recess to ensure it meets students' needs and offers a safe, healthy, and inclusive environment for play. As schools reopen after their extended physical closure, paying attention to play time is even more essential. There are two key areas that educational leaders should address to create a healing recess environment that supports students' health and well-being: universal access and recess design.

### Every Child Should Have Access to Recess Every Day They Are at School

Although two thirds of school districts across the country require elementary schools to provide regularly scheduled recess,<sup>17</sup> there were significant disparities in access to recess before the pandemic. Students who are Black and Latinx, as well as those in low-income urban schools, have historically had less access to recess than have their White and more advantaged peers.<sup>18</sup> Ensuring recess is scheduled and offered during every in-person school day for every child is an important way to close the opportunity gap for recess and offer all children access to this key developmental and healing space.

Even when schools offer recess regularly, some students and some classes have recess withheld for punishment or missed schoolwork. There is virtually no research documenting what percentage of students have recess withheld, but estimates from my work suggest that half or more of elementary recesses in low-income urban schools have students sitting out as punishment or to complete schoolwork.<sup>19</sup> Black and Latinx boys as well as students receiving special education services are the most likely to be disciplined in elementary school,<sup>20</sup> and it is a logical presumption that they may also be the most likely to have recess withheld for discipline. We have no data on how many or which students are kept out of recess to make up schoolwork, but this is a common practice as well. Because it is precisely the most vulnerable children who are excluded from recess at school, this combination of disadvantage and denial of developmental opportunities is a serious equity concern.

Withholding recess is antithetical to the goals of elementary education. All children, even those who misbehave, need an opportunity to play at school, perhaps with additional assistance if their behavior cannot meet school standards. The circumstances caused by COVID-19 present an unprecedented breadth of distress and even trauma in students. All students will return to school having experienced isolation and disconnection from friends, whereas some may return having had even more adverse experiences. With this level of disruption, it is reasonable to expect that students will come back to school with more behavioral challenges, unable to control their emotions, with excess energy, or having regressed in their social and emotional skills. Students with the highest degrees of trauma are likely to be from low-income families and communities of color, which have been more highly affected by COVID-19 and the related economic crisis.<sup>21</sup> These are the same children who already have less access to recess when school is in session—

and now less access to remote schooling and connection to teachers via the digital divide.<sup>22</sup> Denying these students recess will further disadvantage them, but offering regular recess to every child promotes the power of play as a healing opportunity.

## Recess Should Be Organized to Be a Productive Break Time

Historically, recess time has not been prioritized by schools for its contributions to school climate and social-emotional learning—to the detriment of students, faculty, and staff. Evidence suggests some fairly straightforward steps can help to make recess operate smoothly and effectively so that students have the opportunity to learn through play and so that everyone is able to get a needed break during the school day. Research conducted in partnership with the national nonprofit organization Playworks has informed these recommendations, which have been tested in a variety of studies and identified as evidence-based ways to support recess time.<sup>23</sup>

I recommend what is called an “organized” recess, which includes a number of features that encourage student engagement; offers solutions to common play yard problems; and creates a physically and emotionally safe recess period. The next section addresses how to organize recess with additional adaptations for virus-spread curtailment and healing. Key to the concept of organized recess is trained staff to supervise it, whether these are teachers or the paraprofessional aides who often oversee this time. The basic tenets of organized recess include the following.

**An organized and inclusive play yard.** Map the play yard with different activity zones that correspond to students’ interests to engage the majority of students in play. Ensure space is available for those who want imaginative play or to have a quieter recess experience. Make the play yard inclusive so that every child who wants to play is welcome, even if their skills are still emerging. Identify and promote simple conflict resolution strategies; one used by Playworks is the game “rock-paper-scissors.” Establishing a common set of rules for each game can also minimize conflicts.

**A recess space supported by trained staff.** Having staff that buy into the idea of safe, healthy, and inclusive recess is essential and may require professional development. Consider promoting a recess monitor to the coach position. Offering student leadership opportunities for older children in planning or supporting recess is a good way to promote positive youth development and manage recess time. Given the likely restructuring of classes into smaller groups, having teachers rather than aides oversee recess is a potential strategy for both a well-supported recess and preventing virus spread across classes.

**A value for play and its contributions to learning.** Schedule recess every day for every child and create policies that prohibit the withholding of recess for misbehavior or missed schoolwork. Embed recess reforms into school culture by aligning recess with existing programs for character development, social-emotional learning, positive behavior, and bullying prevention.

All of these suggestions support recess at any time. Creating an organized recess that supports student connection and development is especially important during this uncertain school year when schools will likely be limiting student time on campus and potentially closing periodically due to outbreaks.

## Considerations: Adapting Recess for Partial and Full School Reopening

The Global Recess Alliance—a coalition of scholars, health professionals, and education leaders<sup>24</sup>—has developed a set of recommendations for how educators and policymakers can support recess as a place of healing for children as they physically return to school.<sup>25</sup> With input from public health officials internationally, the Alliance has put together a suggested list of adaptations for recess in the era of COVID-19 recovery. Two considerations are especially noteworthy. First, schools should always follow the guidance of their local public health officials and the State of California. Second, educators should acknowledge that young children are likely not able to maintain physical distance of 6 feet from each other, or perhaps even understand what 6 feet looks like.

This may require deeper conversations with public health officials so that guidance can be tailored appropriately for students of different age groups. Short of keeping elementary students sitting in desks all day, schools may need to take other measures to ensure virus containment should hotspots break out. Cancelling recess should not be one of these measures. Medical professionals have advised that being outside diminishes virus spread and that other times of the school day, such as lunch or physical education in an enclosed gymnasium, pose a greater risk.

---

**“ Play is essential. Unstructured time is vital for development, stress reduction, and physical and mental health. The ways forward to keep playgrounds safe align with all of the health measures we have emphasized: good hand washing, isolating those who are ill, and cleaning highly trafficked areas.”<sup>26</sup>**

JEFFREY HUTCHINSON, MD, FELLOW OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

---

## Recommendations for Schools

- Schedule sustained periods of recess for every child every day, at least twice per day, preferably more when children are physically at school.
- Hold recess outdoors whenever possible.
- Limit the number of students at recess at one time, keeping them with their learning cohorts.
- Consider all available indoor and outdoor spaces to provide a range of activity options and to minimize crowding.
- Consider new games, including those that need no equipment.
- Limit contact sports where touching, tackling, or hugging are part of the game.
- If possible, allocate separate bins of equipment for each class, to be used only during recess; clean equipment between recess periods.
- Do not allow children to bring equipment from home.
- Mark out zones or game stations to reduce the number of children who are in contact with each other and to reduce the use of shared equipment.
- Add handwashing stations at recess and show students how to use them properly.
- Clean all equipment after each recess.<sup>27</sup>
- Train adults who monitor recess so they are prepared to support students who may be more energetic, aggressive, or withdrawn, and who may have less capacity to self-regulate, resolve their own conflicts, or figure out how to play together.
- Sedentary or structured activities—like watching movies or activity break videos that do not provide students free choice and peer interactions—are not substitutes for recess.

In addition, although the return to school may happen midyear, schools should put in place their normal start-of-school procedures for orienting students to recess, school rules, and behavior expectations. This may seem out of place timing-wise, but new and returning students will need to understand school recess policies in the COVID-19 era to ensure that recess can have its intended positive effects.

## Recommendations for California State Policy

- As has been done in Utah, count recess as instructional time to allow teachers to be with their classes during recess and provide separate breaks for teachers.<sup>28</sup>
- Include school recess metrics to the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) school climate priority area, including number of minutes per day and policies that disallow recess withholding as punishment.
- Add recess as a category to the guidance for school wellness policies.
- Consider supporting recess as a strategy to combat learning loss so that Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) funds can be deployed to improve recess environments and make them physically and emotionally safe for students.

The Global Recess Alliance recommends that schools consider these additional policies and practices in their planning for recess during school reopening, keeping in mind that play is essential for children’s learning regardless of the public health crises we face.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Barrett, J. (2020, May 1). What parents say their kids miss most about school. *Redbook*. [redbookmag.com/life/mom-kids/a32343704/what-kids-miss-most-about-school/](http://redbookmag.com/life/mom-kids/a32343704/what-kids-miss-most-about-school/); Dodd, H. (2020, April 14). "I can't believe I am going to say this, but I would rather be at school." *New York Times*. [nytimes.com/2020/04/14/us/school-at-home-students-coronavirus.html](http://nytimes.com/2020/04/14/us/school-at-home-students-coronavirus.html)
- <sup>2</sup> Meredith, M. (2020, April 29). Five ways to help children heal after the pandemic. *Tes*. [tes.com/news/five-ways-help-children-heal-after-pandemic](http://tes.com/news/five-ways-help-children-heal-after-pandemic)
- <sup>3</sup> Pellegrini, A. D. (2006). *Recess: Its role in education and development*. L. Erlbaum.
- <sup>4</sup> International Play Association. (2012, May 1). *UN convention on the rights of the child*. [ipaworld.org/chilids-right-to-play/unrc-article-31/un-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child-1](http://ipaworld.org/chilids-right-to-play/unrc-article-31/un-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child-1)
- <sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention with SHAPE America. (2017, January). *Strategies for recess in schools*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/pdf/2016\\_12\\_16\\_schoolrecessstrategies\\_508.pdf](http://cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/pdf/2016_12_16_schoolrecessstrategies_508.pdf); Council on School Health. (2013). The crucial role of recess in school. *Pediatrics*, 131(1), 183–188. [doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-2993](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-2993);
- <sup>6</sup> Global Recess Alliance. (n.d.-a). *Expert testimony*. [globalrecessalliance.org/expert-testimonials](http://globalrecessalliance.org/expert-testimonials). Quotation on Para. 2
- <sup>7</sup> Ginsburg, K. R., Committee on Communications, & Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. (2007). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics*, 119(1), 182–191. [doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-2697](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-2697)
- <sup>8</sup> California Department of Education. (2019). *Belief and purpose*. [cde.ca.gov/eo/mn/mv/index.asp](http://cde.ca.gov/eo/mn/mv/index.asp). Quotation on Para. 1
- <sup>9</sup> Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 357–385. [doi.org/10.3102/0034654313483907](https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654313483907)
- <sup>10</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics. (n.d.). COVID-19 planning considerations: Guidance for school re-entry. [services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/](http://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/)
- <sup>11</sup> Barros, R. M., Silver, E. J., & Stein, R. E. K. (2009). School recess and group classroom behavior. *Pediatrics*, 123(2), 431–436. [doi.org/10.1542/peds.2007-2825](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2007-2825)
- <sup>12</sup> Dusenbury, L., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Social emotional learning in elementary school: Preparation for success. *The Education Digest*, 83(1), 36–43; Ginsburg et al., 2007; Waite-Stupiansky, S., & Findlay, M. (2002). The fourth R: Recess and its link to learning. *The Educational Forum*, 66(1), 16–25. [doi.org/10.1080/00131720108984795](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720108984795)

- <sup>13</sup> Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405–432. doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x; Zins, J. E., & Elias, M. J. (2007). Social and emotional learning: Promoting the development of all students. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 17*(2–3), 233–255. doi.org/10.1080/10474410701413152
- <sup>14</sup> London, R. A., Westrich, L., Stokes-Guinan, K., & McLaughlin, M. (2015). Playing fair: The contribution of high-functioning recess to overall school climate in low-income elementary schools. *Journal of School Health, 85*(1), 53–60. doi.org/10.1111/josh.12216
- <sup>15</sup> London, R. A. (2019b). The right to play: Eliminating the opportunity gap in elementary school recess. *Phi Delta Kappan, 101*(3), 48–52. doi.org/10.1177/0031721719885921
- <sup>16</sup> Massey, W., Neilson, L., & Salas, J. (2020). A critical examination of school-based recess: What do the children think? *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 12*(5), 749–763. doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1683062; McNamara, L., Lodewyk, K., & Franklin, N. (2018). Recess: A study of belongingness, affect, and victimization on the playground. *Children & Schools, 40*(2), 114–121. academic.oup.com/cs/article/40/2/114/4866398
- <sup>17</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). *Results from the school health policies and practices study*. cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/shpps/results.htm
- <sup>18</sup> Jarrett, O. S. (2013, November). *A research-based case for recess*. U.S. Play Coalition. playworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/US-play-coalition\_Research-based-case-for-recess.pdf; London, R. A. (2019a). *Rethinking recess: Creating safe and inclusive playtime for all children in school*. Harvard Education Press.
- <sup>19</sup> London, 2019a.
- <sup>20</sup> U.S. Government Accounting Office. (2018, March). *K–12 education: Discipline disparities for Black students, boys, and students with disabilities* [Report to congressional requesters]. gao.gov/assets/700/690828.pdf
- <sup>21</sup> Couch, K. A., Fairlie, R. W., & Xu, H. (2020). Early evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on minority unemployment. *Journal of Public Economics, 192*, Article 104287. doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104287; Liu, S. R., & Modir, S. (2020). The outbreak that was always here: Racial trauma in the context of COVID-19 and implications for mental health providers. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 12*(5), 439–442. doi.org/10.1037/tra0000784
- <sup>22</sup> EdSource. (2020). Attitudes on key California education issues: Key findings from a statewide survey conducted August 29–September 7, 2020. assets.documentcloud.org/documents/7223216/Chart-Pack-EdSource-Education-Issues-Poll.pdf
- <sup>23</sup> Fortson, J., James-Burdumy, S., Bleeker, M., Beyler, N., London, R. A., Westrich, L., Stokes-Guinan, K., & Castrechini, S. (2013, May 2). *Impact and implementation findings from an experimental evaluation of playworks: Effects on school climate, academic learning, student social skills and behavior* [Report]. Playworks. playworks.org/report/impact-and-implementation-findings-from-an-experimental-evaluation-of-playworks-effects-on-school-climate-academic-learning-student-social-skills-and-behavior; London, 2019a.; Massey, W. V., Stellino, M. B., Claassen, J., Dykstra, S., & Henning, A. (2018). Evidence-Based strategies for socially, emotionally and physically beneficial school recess. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 89*(5), 48–52. doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2018.1440266
- <sup>24</sup> I am a founding member of the Global Recess Alliance.
- <sup>25</sup> Global Recess Alliance. (n.d.-b). *School re-opening? Make sure children have daily time for recess*. globalrecessalliance.org/recess-statement
- <sup>26</sup> Global Recess Alliance, n.d.-a. Quotation from Para. 4
- <sup>27</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Cleaning and disinfection for community facilities. cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/cleaning-disinfection.html
- <sup>28</sup> Minimum School Days, Utah Administrative Code, § R277-419-4(iii)(2)(b) (2020). rules.utah.gov/publicat/code/r277/r277-419.htm#T4

## Author Biography

**Rebecca A. London** is an associate professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research focuses on understanding the ways that communities and community organizations support young people to be healthy and successful. She is the author of *Rethinking Recess: Creating Safe and Inclusive Playtime for All Children in School* (2019).

# Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

*Improving education policy and practice and advancing equity through evidence*

PACE is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. Founded in 1983, PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local decision makers to achieve improvement in performance and more equitable outcomes at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. We do this through:

- 1 bringing evidence to bear on the most critical issues facing our state;
- 2 making research evidence accessible; and
- 3 leveraging partnership and collaboration to drive system improvement.

## Related Publications

Adelman, H., & Taylor, L. (2020, November). ***Restructuring California schools to address barriers to learning and teaching in the COVID-19 context and beyond*** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Gee, K., Murdoch, C., Vang, T., Cuahuey, Q., & Prim, J. (2020, August). ***Multi-Tiered System of Supports to address childhood trauma: Evidence and implications*** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Kimner, H. (2020, July). ***Community schools: A COVID-19 recovery strategy*** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Reback, R. (2018, September). ***Getting down to facts II: Investments in students' physical and mental health in California's public schools*** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.



Stanford Graduate School of Education  
243 Panama Street  
Redwood Hall, Suite G3  
Stanford, CA 94305  
Phone: (650) 724-2832 • Fax: (650) 723-9931

[edpolicyinca.org](http://edpolicyinca.org)