



# The Status of School Recess in Texas School Districts:

A look into best practices, potential obstacles,  
and a path forward to ensure students in Texas  
have access to recess

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# CONTRIBUTORS

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Robert Sanborn, Ed.D  
Katie McConnell, Ed.D  
Mandi Kimball, MSW  
Jenny Eyer, MPH  
Claire Treacy  
David McClendon, Ph.D.  
Laura Rodriguez  
Kelcie Silvio  
Alyssa Shallenberger, MSCJ  
Nawal Traish

# SPECIAL THANKS

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Dairy MAX  
Dr. Debbie Rhea, LiiNK Project at TCU  
Gwen Sims, Harris County Public Health  
Harris County School Health Leadership Group  
It's Time Texas  
Mandy Tyler, Education Service Center Region 20  
Michelle Smith, Texas Action for Healthy Kids  
North Texas Area Coordinators Group  
Stephanie Kellam, United Healthcare  
Texas Assoc. for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, &  
Dance (TAPHERD)  
Texas Association of Rural Schools

# INTRODUCTION

Currently, there is no state-level policy concerning school recess. Instead, the state of Texas only requires that the allotted time for recess adheres to guidelines set by the district's School Health Advisory Council (SHAC). School district SHACs are a required component of all Texas school districts and are comprised of members of their communities. SHACs are responsible for assisting the district in decisions regarding student health and wellness.

While SHACs across Texas have worked to stabilize school recess time, it is widely acknowledged by education leaders across the state that school recess is frequently being shortened or removed entirely. Often, recess is usurped to make room for more instructional time or is revoked entirely as punishment for minor infractions. To better understand the landscape of recess in Texas, CHILDREN AT RISK set out to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to determine 1) if there are recess policies in place, 2) how recess is being implemented, and 3) potential obstacles to schools' abilities to maintain a recess of appropriate length.

In general, districts with board-approved recess policies are thinly spread across the state in patchy clusters. The Greater Houston area, for example, is conspicuously lacking in board-approved recess policies, a trend which holds for most Texas school districts. Instead of board-approved policies, many school districts have established guidelines. A district with guidelines as opposed to a board-approved policy often opens the door to misinterpretation of the guidelines and an overall lack of enforcement of school recess at the campus level.

CHILDREN AT RISK opted to focus research on local school districts working towards implementing a district-wide policy, conducting in-depth case studies on these districts to better identify and assess the potential obstacles associated with this process. The goal was to gather information and techniques in order to assist other Texas districts through the process of implementing a successful recess policy.

The benefits of school recess are strongly supported by research, but school districts often undervalue the role recess plays in a child's education. This report will analyze the research, provide an in-depth examination of current policies in school districts in Texas, and offer recommendations on how to increase the prevalence of recess in schools.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Along with reading, writing, and arithmetic, recess has been called "the fourth R" because of its role as a mainstay of the early school experience.<sup>1</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), recess specifically refers to "regularly scheduled periods within the elementary school day for unstructured physical activity and play."<sup>2</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) further describes recess as "a necessary break in the day for optimizing a child's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development."<sup>3</sup> Recess is distinct from physical education programs (PE) in that it is much less often codified in state policy and is designed to be student-driven free time rather than structured activity. In what follows, the current state of recess is explored, including its purpose, evidence-based benefits, and prevalence in U.S. schools.

### Purpose and Benefits

Recess provides students a chance to temporarily shift their energy and attention away from academic instruction and towards physical activity, socialization, and game-play with their peers. This break in the school day has been shown in studies to produce a range of physical, cognitive, and social benefits to students. For example, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation surveyed 1,951 elementary school principals and found that 8 in 10 considered recess to have a positive impact on students' academic performance, while two-thirds specifically reported that students listened better and were more focused in class following a recess period.<sup>4</sup> Over 95% of principals agreed that recess has had a positive impact on their students' social

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<sup>1</sup> Waite-Stupiansky, S. & Findlay, M. (2002). "The fourth r: Recess and its link to learning." *The Educational Forum*. Vol. 66(1):16-25. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00131720108984795?journalCode=utef20>

<sup>2</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics. "Policy statement: The crucial role of recess in schools." *Pediatrics*. 131, 183-188 Retrieved from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/131/1/183.full.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ramstetter, C. & Murray, R. "Time to play: Recognizing the benefits of recess." *American Educator*. Spring 2017: 17-23. Retrieved from [https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/ae\\_spring2017ramstetter\\_and\\_murray.pdf](https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/ae_spring2017ramstetter_and_murray.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2010). "The state of play: Gallup survey of principals on school recess." Retrieved from [http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/surveys\\_and\\_polls/2010/rwjf53884](http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/surveys_and_polls/2010/rwjf53884)

development and overall well-being. The AAP notes that recess can help contribute to the 60 minutes of daily physical activity recommended for youth, which is especially important as rates of childhood obesity and diabetes rise.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, a neuroimaging study by Dr. Charles Hillman at the University of Urbana-Champaign in Illinois examined students' brain activity while taking a test, and students who had had a physical activity break just prior to the test showed heightened brain activity when compared to peers in the control group.<sup>6</sup>

## Disparities in Access to Recess

Like many aspects of public education, access to recess has unfortunately been found to be unequal for different groups of students. A 2009 study by researchers at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York found that across the United States, 3 in 10 children either had no recess during the school day or had less than 15 minutes of recess. The study also found that schools serving predominantly Black and Hispanic children were less likely to have recess, as well as lower-income students, students in cities, and students with parents of lower education levels.<sup>7</sup> These findings were corroborated by a 2012 Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) study as well.<sup>8</sup> A 2002 study found that 56% of students living below the poverty line had recess time at school compared to 83% of those living above the poverty line.<sup>9</sup> It is possible that this disparity is caused by a lack of proper recess equipment or space at these schools, or increased pressure to spend more time in the classroom to boost test scores that lag relative to those at peer schools.

## Best Practices

While each school district and elementary school may take into consideration their students' needs and their own priorities, best practices, promulgated by groups like the AAP, can provide a framework for school administrators and teachers to look to when shaping school recess policies.

### Ending the Withholding of Recess as a Disciplinary Tool

Because most children cherish their recess time, its withholding has often been used as a threat or disciplinary tool. In a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation survey of elementary school principals (2009), 77% reported that this practice was used by some of their teachers in response to students' behavior. However, representatives from the AAP, among other groups, advocate against such a practice, arguing that recess should not be relegated to the precarious status of reward or wielded for disciplinary reasons. Recess should be a consistent and reliable part of the school day for every elementary school child.<sup>10</sup> The National Association for Sport and Education also endorses this position, arguing that recess "is an essential component of education and should be part of the curriculum for preschool through elementary school."<sup>11</sup>

### Recess Before Lunch

Another well-studied best practice is to schedule recess before lunch.<sup>12</sup> According to the National Education Association, this sequence has desirable benefits. Specifically, "Schools that schedule recess before lunch report that students eat more fruits and vegetables, drink more milk, waste less food, and are better behaved on the playground, in the lunchroom, and in the classroom."<sup>13</sup> Controlled studies conducted by both Cornell University and Brigham Young University over 14 days at seven

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<sup>5</sup> Jarrett, O. (2013). "A Research-based case for recess." U.S. Play Coalition, Georgia State University. Retrieved from [https://usplaycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/13.11.5\\_Recess\\_final\\_online.pdf](https://usplaycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/13.11.5_Recess_final_online.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> "Recess moves: A toolkit for quality recess." (2013). Minnesota Department of Education. Retrieved from [http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/storage/Recess\\_Moves\\_A\\_Toolkit\\_for\\_Quality\\_Recess.pdf](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/storage/Recess_Moves_A_Toolkit_for_Quality_Recess.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> "The Importance of Recess." (2015) Harvard Medical School. Retrieved from <http://www.health.harvard.edu/exercise-and-fitness/the-importance-of-recess>

<sup>8</sup> Slater SJ, Nicholson L, Chiqui J, Turner L, Chaloupka F. (2012). "The Impact of state laws and district policies on physical education and recess practices in a nationally representative sample of U.S. public elementary schools." *Archives of Pediatrics Adolescent Medicine* 166(4): 311-316. doi:10.1001/archpediatrics.2011.1133. Retrieved from <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/1148397>

<sup>9</sup> Jarrett, O. (2013). "A Research-Based Case for Recess." U.S. Play Coalition, Georgia State University. Retrieved from [https://usplaycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/13.11.5\\_Recess\\_final\\_online.pdf](https://usplaycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/13.11.5_Recess_final_online.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Jarrett, O. (2013). "A Research-Based Case for Recess." U.S. Play Coalition, Georgia State University. Retrieved from [https://usplaycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/13.11.5\\_Recess\\_final\\_online.pdf](https://usplaycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/13.11.5_Recess_final_online.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Fuller, L. "Recess Before Lunch." National Education Association. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/home/43158.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

elementary school campuses found statistically significant benefits associated with such a sequence.<sup>14</sup> Having released more energy before lunch, students are hungrier and less likely to use lunch time as play time. This will help ensure students eat a full, balanced meal and will likely result in decreased amounts of food waste.

### CDC Recommendations

While it is widely recommended that recess be preserved as a time for free play for students, distinct from PE in the level of adult guidance and intervention, it should be managed and supervised intentionally. Ensuring recess is well-supervised will help reduce the potential for student conflict and bullying, so every student has access to all the benefits of recess. The CDC recommends ways that schools can implement recess periods that benefit students without disrupting other aspects of the school day.<sup>15</sup>

The CDC encourages schools to designate specific indoor and outdoor recess spaces and to have contingency plans for holding recess in alternative spaces during inclement weather. Finally, the CDC recommends that schools ensure that students with disabilities have inclusive options for recess activities and that playground spaces are accessible.

### Prevalence of Recess and Impact of Legislation

According to data in the Spring 2017 issue of *American Educator* magazine, over 90% of elementary schools nationwide offer some amount of recess to their students, and the average time spent in recess is about 26 minutes per day. The percentage of students receiving such a break decreases with each ascending grade level – from 95% of kindergartners to 35% of sixth graders.<sup>16</sup> All students, however, are vulnerable to the recent trend towards reducing recess in favor of increased instructional time. This trend began in earnest around 2001, when the No Child Left Behind legislation put pressure on schools to improve standardized test scores. Schools began to increase instructional time at the expense of recess. According to a Georgia State University study, the percentage of U.S. school districts with any written recess policy fell from 57% to 40% from 2006 to 2011.<sup>16</sup> As of 2016, only five states had specific recess policies. While Texas is not one of the five states that has a recess policy, it does have an explicit Physical Education policy. The PE policy allows for, but does not require, unstructured recess time.<sup>17</sup>

A 2012 study published in the *JAMA* sampled 1,761 schools in 690 districts across the U.S. and identified some noteworthy trends regarding the connection between recess policies and the likelihood of implementation:

Schools located in states with laws encouraging daily recess were significantly more likely to have 20 minutes of recess daily. District policies were not significantly associated with school-level recess practices. Adequate PE time was inversely associated with recess and vice versa, suggesting that schools are substituting one form of physical activity for another rather than providing the recommended amount of both recess and PE.<sup>18</sup>

This study shows that while legislative advocacy can be an effective way to promote the consistency of recess in schools, policy should be carefully written to clearly differentiate between recess and PE and offer unique protection to recess.

### Conclusion

The latest literature makes clear that school recess is more than a time for students to let off steam—it is a critical part of the school day that benefits students cognitively, socially, and physically. While recess has been increasingly subject to cuts by administrators in favor of instructional time, or reduced because of the perception that PE is enough, there are states that have cemented the provision of recess by schools into law. The existence of state policies has been found to be more effective than

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<sup>14</sup>Kim, J. (2015). "The Benefit of recess before lunch." *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/01/a-more-nutritious-school-day-through-recess/384526/>

<sup>15</sup> "Recess Planning in Schools: A Guide to Putting Strategies for Recess into Practice." (2017). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/pdf/2016\\_12\\_16\\_schoolrecessplanning\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/pdf/2016_12_16_schoolrecessplanning_508.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Jarrett, O. (2013). "A Research-Based Case for Recess." U.S. Play Coalition, Georgia State University. Retrieved from [https://usplaycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/13.11.5\\_Recess\\_final\\_online.pdf](https://usplaycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/13.11.5_Recess_final_online.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Education Commission of the States. (2016). Response to Public Information Request. <https://www.ecs.org/ec-content/uploads/SIRRecess2.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Slater SJ, Nicholson L, Chriqui J, Turner L, Chaloupka F. (2012). "The Impact of state laws and district policies on physical education and recess practices in a nationally representative sample of U.S. public elementary schools." *Archives of Pediatrics Adolescent Medicine* 166(4): 311-316. doi:10.1001/archpediatrics.2011.1133. Retrieved from <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/1148397>

local policies for ensuring that recess is provided, suggesting that the passage of a state-level recess policy is an effective way to ensure local districts develop policies that will benefit their schools.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Questions

For 13 years, CHILDREN AT RISK has assigned A-F letter grades to Texas public schools to help parents, educators, and community members understand how their schools are performing and spark dialogue on the quality of public education across Texas. The grades are assigned through an evaluation of a school's raw performance on reading and math STAAR tests and overall campus performance compared to other campuses with similar levels of poverty. The evaluation also factors in student growth year-to-year on STAAR tests, graduation rates, and other college readiness factors. According to CHILDREN AT RISK standards, a school is considered high-performing when it earns an A or B grade in the ratings. The most recent analysis revealed that there are slightly more than 3,000 A or B schools across the state, comprising 38% of all schools in Texas. Academic performance is impacted by multiple factors, for example students enrolled in high-performing schools often have greater access to nutritious food, healthcare, and mental health supports that all impact students' ability to learn. Since studies have shown recess positively impacts the students' eating choices at lunch, promotes physical activity, and provides opportunities for students to socialize, it is possible access to recess—among other factors—impacts students' academic achievement. Therefore, CHILDREN AT RISK formulated research questions to understand which districts in Texas have a recess policy and to what extent schools or have consistent access to recess. Our team then analyzed possible correlations in academic performance and recess.

### Survey

In December of 2017, CHILDREN AT RISK administered an online questionnaire to gather data on school recess and recess policies in districts across Texas, with a focus on those in the Greater Houston Area. The questionnaire was comprised of open-ended and close-ended questions.

### Participants

Between December 2017 and May 2018, 119 responses were collected from 79 school districts across the state (4 of the 79 districts answered anonymously), 28 of which are located in the Greater Houston Area. Responses were received from urban, suburban, and rural districts, as well as from charter networks.

### Respondents

The below tables show the regions where respondents are located, along with their positions in their respective school district or campus. The majority of respondents were either from the Greater Houston Area or from the North Texas region (Dallas and Fort Worth). They were also largely involved in PE (e.g. Instructional Specialist) or were administrators at the district level (e.g. Director of Special Programs).

For districts that had more than one response, only the response from the individual with the highest position within the district (i.e. District Administrator or SHAC Chair) was included. For the purpose of this study, we analyzed similarities and differences between districts classified as urban (e.g. Houston ISD), suburban (e.g. Fort Bend ISD), and rural (e.g. Hunt ISD), based on the classifications from the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Lastly, prior to distributing the recess survey, the research team reviewed the School Wellness Policies (a federally required policy) of local school districts. If a school district has a board-approved recess policy, it should be addressed in the Wellness Policy. The review indicated there were no school districts in the Greater Houston Area which had board-approved school recess policies.

*Region	n = 79
Houston	28
North Texas	12
San Antonio	12
East Texas	6
Panhandle	4
Rio Grande Valley	4
Coastal	3
Other Central	3
West Texas	2
Austin	1
NA	4

**Position	n = 119
Physical Education	38
District Administration	23
Did not answer	12
Student Wellness/Health	9
Campus Administration	8
Parent	8
School Health Advisory Council	8
Nutrition/Food	7
Nurse	5
School Counselor	1

\* Data in the regional table only reflects unique responses

\*\* Data in the position table reflects all 119 responses

## Key Findings

### Status of Recess Policies

In the initial phase of survey distribution, responses were received which contradicted the earlier finding that there are no schools in the Greater Houston Area with board-approved recess policies. However, further investigation identified recess guidelines rather than a board-approved policy. As mentioned earlier, guidelines are not as effective as a board-approved policy.

When speaking with districts, it was determined that their guidelines largely consist of un-enforced suggestions. These findings support the initial research, which indicated no school districts in the Greater Houston Area (and few across the state) had a school board-approved recess policy.

### Specifics of the Recess Policies

- **Allotted Time:** Just half of respondents, (52%, n=62) reported that their district has a written policy specifying the number of recess minutes a child should receive each day.
- **School Discipline:** When asked if districts had a policy in place prohibiting schools from taking recess away for disciplinary reasons, 34% (n=40) responded “yes”.
- **Local Control:** The majority of districts (66%, n =78) allow individual campuses to determine how recess time is spent. Local control plays a major role in the implementation of recess in Texas schools. Without a district-level policy, individual teachers, principals, and other school staff have the discretion to decide details such as the number of minutes allotted for recess or whether or not recess can be taken away for disciplinary reasons.
- **Recess Structure:** The majority (65%, n = 75) of respondents indicated that students engage in free play during recess time, as opposed to structured physical activity that is ideally reserved for PE class time. 33% of respondents answered that their recess time was a combination of free play and structured activities.



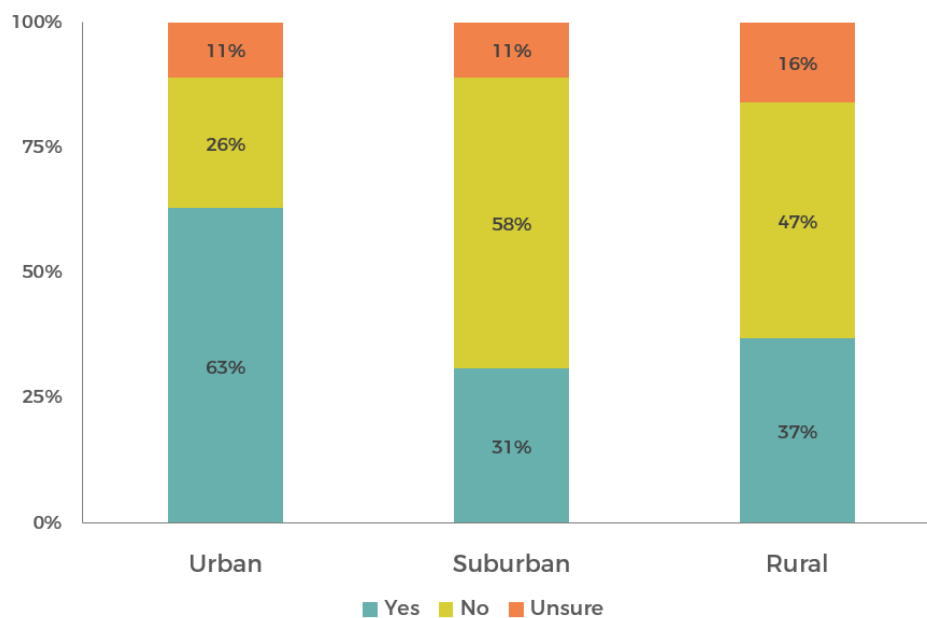
## Policies in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Districts

The table below shows the representation of the three district classifications as they responded to the survey.

Classification	Unique Responses
Urban	19
Suburban	36
Rural	19
Charter	1
NA (did not provide district name)	4

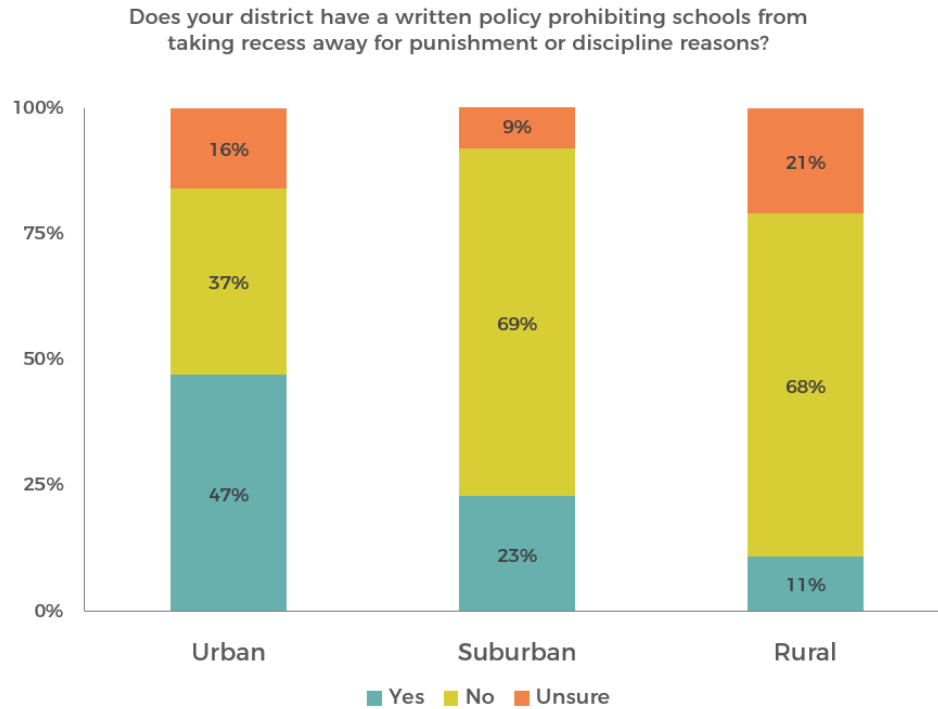
The graph below shows the trend in responses when districts were asked if they had a policy specifying the minutes required for their recess time period. It is important to note that after further investigation, CHILDREN AT RISK realized that when speaking to a “policy”, most districts were in fact referencing their guidelines for recess, rather than a board-approved policy.

Does your school district have a written policy specifying the number of recess minutes students should participate in each day?



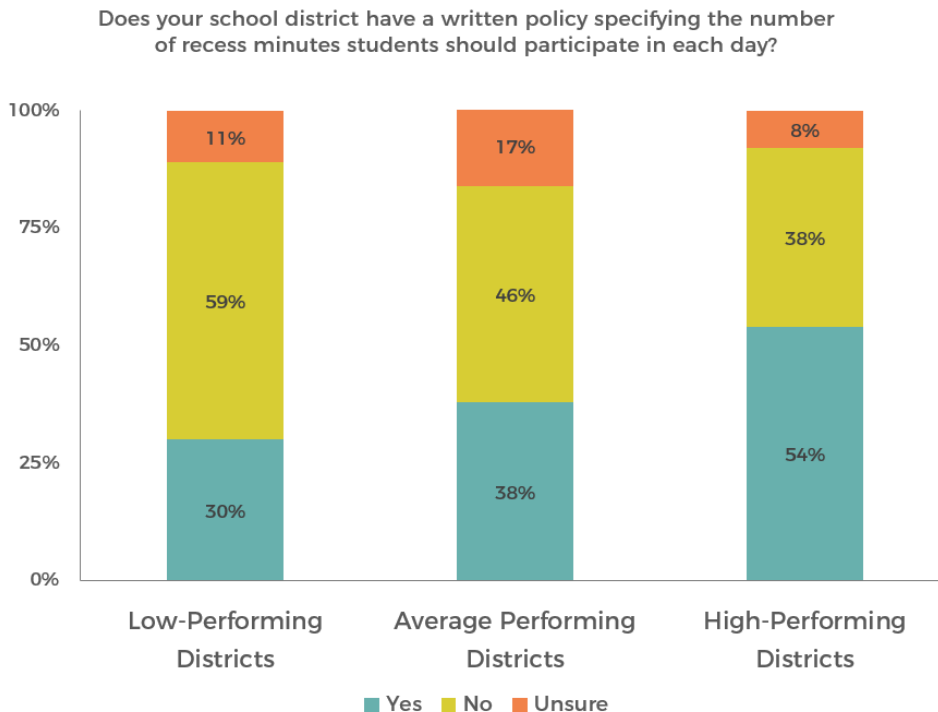
The data revealed that districts classified as urban are more likely to have a policy which specifies the amount of time which should be allowed for recess in place, followed by rural districts. It was also observed that in each type of district, a significant number of respondents answered that they were unsure of whether or not their district had a recess policy, and more rural-area respondents were unsure than their urban and suburban counterparts.

The graph below shows that only 11% of rural districts indicated that they had a policy in place prohibiting schools from taking recess away for disciplinary reasons compared to suburban and urban districts, which were two and four times more likely to have such policies, respectively. When considering urban districts, it should be noted this classification includes districts such as Houston ISD and Dallas ISD, the two largest districts in the state. This could explain some of the disparities between urban and rural districts, as large, urban districts are more likely to have the staff and capacity to prioritize wellness policies



### Relationship between Academic Performance and Recess

The below graph illustrates the relationship between CHILDREN AT RISK grades and the reported presence of recess policies.



The above data is split by districts that have less than 25% A or B schools (low-performing districts), those who have 25-50% A or B schools (average performing districts), and those who have greater than 50% A or B schools (high-performing districts). The responses from districts across the state revealed that those that are high-performing (more than 50% A or B schools) are twice as likely to have a recess policy safeguarding the amount of time students have for recess than districts that are low-performing (less than 25% A or B schools). While recess certainly is not the only contributor to the performance of a school the findings reveal a compelling positive correlation between school performance and access to school recess.

## Additional Comments

CHILDREN AT RISK completed the survey by asking respondents if they had any additional comments, thoughts, or reflections. Many of the responses were informative and others were compelling. Below are a few of the additional responses we received:

- “I would like to see recess become mandatory at elementary and middle school levels. On our campus, the only time students get movement time is during the passing period between classes and PE time.”
- “Campuses can modify how recess is spent and they choose to spend less time-even though there is a guideline about not using recess for discipline- teachers still do it.”
- “Our district currently has no required recess, however most schools provide 15 min. It can (and is!) taken away for punishment per teacher discretion.”
- “I am trying to get a recess policy implemented in my district. Recess at my children's school is often withheld for disciplinary purposes and students only get 15 minutes per day when they get it at all.”
- “The kids do NOT get enough time outside. They spend too much time testing to test. If they got outside more during the day, they would perform better.”
- “Recess is so important for developing life and social skills not taught in classrooms, building friendships, and just getting the physical activity needed to activate the brain. It's become very restrictive recently, and we'd love to see our kids treated like kids and allowed to have creative play, rather than molded into grey carbon copies of bored and boring.”
- “Recess is vital time where students get to interact, have fun and stay active.”

## CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

After reviewing the results from the online survey, three districts in the Greater Houston Area generously agreed to participate in further discussion regarding their current recess policies. The summaries and key findings from the three case studies are as follows.

### District A

#### Overview

- 56,137 students
- 78% economically disadvantaged
- Demographics: African American- 8%, Hispanic- 83%, White- 6%, Other- 3%

#### Policy Status

District A currently has guidelines for school recess in its wellness plan. The current guidelines state that recess is “encouraged” for 20 minutes each day, the result of a recent push to have the guidelines state that recess shall be “provided” for 20 minutes each day. District A’s SHAC is currently working to have a policy approved and is in the process of determining the exact language to use. They are planning to recommend that recess is not to be withheld for disciplinary reasons or classwork, should be all free play, and must be at least 30 minutes long (including transition time and water breaks).

#### Barriers and Obstacles

District A recognizes that in order to have the policy passed and approved, they need strong support from parents in the district. However, they have struggled to have consistent year-to-year parent support, which makes it significantly easier for district leaders to reject the policy. They also acknowledge that the support of principals and teachers can be hard to gain, as they feel an increasing pressure to perform well on standardized tests, tempting them to maximize time in the classroom at the cost of recess time.

### Support for Policy

Because District A recognizes the vital role that parents play in having policies approved, they plan to visit campuses across the district and inform them of the specifics of the policy. They also plan to utilize federal Title I parent engagement plan requirements. Additionally, District A plans to leverage the support of a few key players to garner more support from other influential individuals. The district's Associate Superintendent of Projects, Planning, and Communications works directly with the Superintendent daily and is very supportive of vibrant community engagement. The district has a Behavioral Response Team (BRT) that has been supportive of recess, as they see the impact recess has on positive classroom behavior and brain development.

### Implementation Plan

If the policy is passed and becomes part of the district-wide handbook, then all schools will implement the policy immediately. This will also require the SHAC and other district leaders to meet with principals and bring them up-to-date on the current policy and new requirements to ensure effective implementation.

### Advice for Other Districts

Based on its experience so far, District A suggests starting with the SHAC and a strong network of parents who support the policy. They recommend advocating for the policy from the stance that research suggests recess has a positive impact on brain development, as they have found that people are less likely to find fault in such an argument.

## District B

### Overview

- 30,744 students
- 42% economically disadvantaged
- Demographics: African American- 19%, Hispanic- 44%, White- 27%, Other- 10%

### Policy Status

The district does not currently have a board-approved policy in place. The district instead has guidelines in its wellness plan similar to District A. However, the district is actively working to have a policy approved that designates the number of minutes budgeted for recess, recognizes that recess cannot be withheld as a means of bolstering school performance, and requires that recess entirely encompasses free play.

### Barriers and Obstacles

District B feels that one of its largest obstacles is getting the support of principals and teachers. They expressed how educators in the district either undervalue or do not recognize the correlation between school recess and academic success.

### Support for Policy

Each campus within District B designates someone to act as the Wellness Coordinator for that campus. Campus Wellness Coordinators are usually nurses, PE teachers, or other school staff. These individuals are the main advocates for anything related to health and wellness for the students at their campus, including recess. The district plans to heavily utilize and rely on these leaders to ensure the passage of a new recess policy.

### Implementation Plan

To prepare the district for implementation, the SHAC plans to go to both the PE teachers' meeting and the district-wide principal meetings to discuss the work SHAC is doing and the importance of recess. They also plan to implement something to incentivize schools that are doing great work to improve student wellness and increasing access to school recess. All schools in the district will ideally implement new recess guidelines at the same time; however, they acknowledge that this may not happen smoothly and that practices will need to be put in place to ensure awareness and implementation at the campus level. To be sure that schools are implementing updated guidelines, the district will require principals to submit reports of daily schedules and of recess, including when and how the time is spent.

## Advice for Other Districts

District B recommends that other districts considering implementing a recess policy find a strong, vocal advocate for the policy who is willing to do the research. This person – often a parent – should also have the “big picture” in mind to benefit all children, not just his or her own child. The district also suggests looking to other districts similar in size and demographic that have been successful for guidance.

## District C

### Overview

- 35,016 students
- 56% economically disadvantaged
- Demographics: African American- 5%, Hispanic- 60%, White- 27%, Other- 8%

### Policy Status

Like District A and B, District C does not have a board-approved policy at this time. The district recently submitted a Student Welfare policy to be part of the Board Policy Manual stating that recess should be 30 minutes each day, not including restroom breaks, water breaks, or transition time. The policy was passed, but only stated that recess should be provided daily and did not include further regulations. The district is currently working to update its recess regulations, which do not have to be approved by the board. In the regulations, the district can be more explicit with their recess recommendations. However, schools are not required to follow the regulations. In addition to the number of minutes allocated for recess daily, the regulation will also include guidelines against withholding recess for disciplinary reasons. Furthermore, they suggest that if a child is to be kept from his or her recess time, the parent should be notified via writing.

### Barriers and Obstacles

As mentioned above, the recess regulations in the wellness plan will be a step in the right direction for District C, but the district representative acknowledged that campuses are not required to implement these regulations. Additionally, STAAR testing and academic pressure push teachers to prioritize time in the classroom over brain breaks. The district works on a 90-minute block schedule, meaning they have 90 minutes each for math, reading, and other essential subjects. The goal is to have teachers and campuses arrange the 90-minute blocks to allow for 15-minute recess breaks.

### Support for Policy

The district currently has something known as a D-SHAC or District School Health Advisory Council. They also have a Coordinated School Health Leadership Team that is responsible for enforcing the 10 components of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model of the CDC. One of the 10 components of this model is to increase physical activity, something both the D-SHAC and the Coordinated School Health Leadership Team have emphasized.

### Implementation Plan

District C understands the importance of using existing research on brain development to inform principals and teachers of effective teaching strategies and the importance of recess time. They acknowledge that they need to garner further support from parents and administrators. The district has five core values: Moral Compass, Every Child, Collaborative Spirit, Collective Greatness, and Limitless Curiosity. In arguing for the adoption of a board-approved policy, the D-SHAC tries to remind others of the district’s core values and its commitment to educating every child in a personal way. In order to honor this commitment, schools must recognize that, as kinesthetic learners, students require movement to be successful.

## SUMMARY

The results of the survey confirmed several of our hypotheses and emphasized the need for further support for school recess. The survey showed that students often have access to recess, but it highlighted the differences in access across the state at both the district and campus levels. While many districts have guidelines, or “policies”, they are at times not followed, which can cause confusion for school employees, parents, and students.

The variety of responses from individuals within any given school district further indicates lack of clarity about school recess policy. This phenomenon illustrates the ambiguity of many districts’ policies and the importance of more clearly defining and strategically implementing recess policy district-wide.

The administration of the survey garnered interest from several coalitions across the state, a handful of which asked that the surveys be distributed to coalition members during scheduled meetings. Our team attended these meetings and were able to speak directly with respondents about the trends observed from the collected responses. Their survey responses, and follow-up conversations, helped to provide clarity for our research team. For this report, we did not alter any responses, as we feel these results further prove the need for a standard, district-wide, board-approved policy around school recess.

After collecting these survey responses, we wanted to understand where districts had found success and where there was a need for additional support. The results of the case studies and survey responses has enabled CHILDREN AT RISK to develop several state and local recommendations that would be beneficial to the dialogue about school recess policy and its implementation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to initiate a movement towards increased access to school recess, CHILDREN AT RISK has outlined the following recommendations at both the state and local level.

### LOCAL

- **Create Resources:** Create an educational tool that explains the correlation between longer, consistent school recess access and improved educational outcomes. This tool should be made available to school district representatives and SHAC leaders to empower them to advocate to administrators.
- **Promote Local Policies:** School Board members should request information and policy recommendations for school recess from the district's local SHAC. Based on the information received, the board should develop and adopt policies that align with the district's needs.
- **Support Advocacy:** Local SHAC leaders, community partners, and CHILDREN AT RISK should advocate for board adopted school recess policies and work with school district administrators to develop recess policies that take into account best practices identified across the state.

### STATEWIDE

- **Require Local Recess Policies:** The Texas Legislature should require school boards to adopt and publish recess policies for their school districts. This policy should be easily accessible to the public, especially to parents. Parents and community leaders cannot advocate for their students if they do not know there is a need for change.
- **Build Partnerships:** Community partners should engage the Texas School Health Advisory Council (TSHAC) as they work to establish statewide best practices for school boards and school districts.
- **Create Awareness:** Parents, teachers, school administrators, and health advocate should unite around a common policy recommendation and coordinate efforts during the 86<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session.

It is well-established that healthy children are better learners, but until the connection between recess, health, and educational outcomes is better understood and accepted, school recess policies will not take precedence among local and state policymakers. This report is a starting point for advocates, educators, and health leaders. We hope these findings spark a conversation that will eventually lead to more children learning and playing throughout the school day.