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Playing First, Eating Later

Growing Number Of Elementary Schools Putting Off Lunchtime Until After Recess

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EAST HADDAM

It is early afternoon on a sunny weekday in October, and the nurses' office inside East Haddam Elementary School is nearly deserted. The three child-size cots are empty. No groaning students await comfort for aches or pains. The only sound to be heard is that of school nurses filling out paperwork.

"Welcome to the world of recess before lunch," nurse Marty Dexter said. "In the past, at this time of the day, this office would have been full of sick kids. They'd get sick from eating too fast on their rush to recess, or lose their taco after hanging upside down on the monkey bars, or get headaches from not eating at all. Kids like that are in no shape to learn."

That all changed this fall, when East Haddam joined a growing number of schools rearranging their daily schedules to allow children to go to recess before eating lunch. Schools from Norwalk to Niantic are letting kids play before they eat because studies suggest those children eat, behave and learn better than children who eat before they play.

Those studies caught the eye of Cynthia Mello, the principal at East Haddam Elementary. She thought the concept blended well with the school's philosophy of emphasizing a child's social and emotional growth as well as academics. Like every other principal, she wanted to squeeze the most out of every school day, but she believes an active, healthy child learns best.

"Recess before lunch makes a natural kind of sense," Mello said. "That's what we do at home. We call a child in from play to eat. An adult wouldn't think about eating a big meal before going to the gym, so why should we expect any different from a child? We can't stick by an old schedule just because that's the way it's always been done."

In 2001, a national study found less than 5 percent of elementary schools had recess before lunch, but now the idea is spreading fast as districts scramble to find low-cost, research-supported ways to comply with a new federal law requiring most schools to adopt a local wellness policy that promotes student



nutrition and physical activity.

Last year, the Connecticut Department of Education published a guide to help schools adopt successful local wellness policies, and scheduling recess before lunch was included among the list of recommendations, said Susan Fiore, the department's nutrition education coordinator. Several schools that participated in a state-funded wellness pilot project made the switch.

"Kids come to lunch ready to eat," said school wellness center coordinator Shawn Grunwald of Windham, which has recess before lunch at one grade school. "They've worked up an appetite, satisfied some of their socialization needs so the focus then at lunch is to eat. ... They may also be better behaved because they have gotten some of their energy out."

Studies in Montana and Ohio found that children who have recess before lunch are more likely to finish their lunches, take in more nutrients and behave better on the playground, in the cafeteria and in afternoon classes. Teachers tell researchers they saved more than 10 minutes of class time that would have once been spent calming students down after recess.

Disciplinary actions dropped by 60 percent over three years in one Montana middle school. Officials there believed students ate more and ate better after physical exercise, which cut down on the restlessness, lack of focus and classroom outbursts that used to occur after fast lunches of half-eaten chips, candy and soda under the old system of lunch before recess.

Despite the benefits, working out the logistics of the schedule change isn't easy, Mello said.

Children don't have time to stop in the classroom on their way from the playground to the cafeteria, so they drop their lunches into large plastic bins, which select students haul to the cafeteria during the five-minute break between recess and lunch, and they use newly installed hand sanitizers to wash away the grime and germs.

Students who use inhalers or pumps to control their asthma must now go down to the nurses' office about 20 minutes before recess, which interrupts class time. Under the old schedule, those students simply stopped by the office on the way to lunch. By the time lunch was over, the drugs had hit their system, and the children were ready to play.

But the new schedule actually makes it easier for 6-year-old Emma McGahee to manage her allergy to a common food additive. The first-grader can go into shock if she even touches, much less ingests, a certain kind of dye, so using monkey bars touched by children who may have had dye residue on their hands would have been too risky. Now Emma proudly shows off calluses forged by daily monkey bar sessions.

The new schedule makes kickball fanatics like Kevin Moreau happy because they get to play before they eat. The third-grader admits he used to spend his lunch dreaming about kickball when he should have been eating, but now he returns from recess exhausted, hungry and ready to eat. He still thinks about kickball during lunch, but now he dreams while eating.

One of Kevin's classmates, Bridget Haines, said she enjoys the opportunity to play soccer earlier in the day than she did last year, but most appreciates the change in schedule because it means no more post-soccer stomach cramps. The 8-year-old used to be one of those children who would feel ill after lunch.

"I like running around at recess," Haines said. "Recess should be fun, not make you sick."

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