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UNIVERSITY  
of VERMONT

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**Saving Recess and Lunch:**

**What states are doing to combat the impact of education reform on the structure of the school day**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) passed by the Bush Administration in 2001 rated schools based on student test results. The cost of implementing testing and reconsidering the value of the tests themselves have caused a number of states to reconsider how they devote class time and measure student performance.<sup>1</sup> NCLB focuses on measuring the number of students in each grade level in each school by proficiency in reading and math. It also set 2014 as a deadline for schools to be judged on whether students are proficient in these subjects.<sup>2</sup>

In January 2010, the Obama administration proposed an overhaul of NCLB.

NCLB issues the equivalent of a pass-fail report card for every school each year, an evaluation that Obama administration officials say fails to differentiate among chaotic schools in chronic failure, schools that are helping low-scoring students improve and high-performing suburban schools that nonetheless appear to be neglecting some low-scoring students.<sup>3</sup>

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described the Obama reforms as a fairer characterization of schools' academic progress.

We want accountability reforms that factor in student growth, progress in closing achievement gaps, proficiency towards college and career-ready standards, high school graduation and college enrollment rates.<sup>4</sup>

Obama's proposed accountability system "would divide schools into more categories, offering

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Education. "Helping Practitioners Meet the Goals of No Child Left Behind, 2004." <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/technology/reports/help-pract.pdf> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> New York Times Topics. "Times Topics: No Child Left Behind." December 13, 2010. [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/n/no\\_child\\_left\\_behind\\_act/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/n/no_child_left_behind_act/index.html) (accessed Feb 2, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Dillon, Sam. "Obama to Seek Sweeping Change in 'No Child' Law, 2010." *The New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/01/education/01child.html?adxnnl=1&fta=y&adxnnlx=1296676847-ZtH7mRVR37MpoFn2U/7P7A> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Dillon, 2010.

recognition to those that are succeeding and providing large new amounts of money to help improve or close failing schools.”<sup>5</sup> If NCLB overhaul did not occur, thousands more schools would be labeled as failing each year until 2014, the NCLB deadline by which schools were required to bring every student to proficiency in reading and math. The Obama administration has proposed a new goal of all students being “college or career ready” upon high school graduation to replace the 2014 universal proficiency deadline.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Effects of Reduced Recess and Lunch Time**

Since the 2001 enactment of NCLB, forty-four percent of school districts increased time for English/Language Arts (ELA) and math in their elementary schools and decreased time in other subjects, according to the Center on Education Policy’s 2007 survey.<sup>7</sup> Twenty percent of all districts reported decreasing time for recess. “Schools that cut recess time reported reductions from 184 minutes per week pre-NCLB, or 37 minutes per day, to 144 minutes per week in 2007, or 29 minutes per day.”<sup>8</sup>

Schools struggling to meet proficiency requirements on testing have seen sweeping changes to allotted time in unstructured student activity to extra in-class time. Two areas have been increasingly affected, and include mainly unstructured physical activity (recess), but also lunchtime. For example, in Massachusetts, Superintendent Nadine Binkley has changed the lunch/recess time from 40 to 30 minutes, while simultaneously eliminating a 20 minute silent reading program. This school district will then add 30 minutes a day, or 2 hours a week, to their academic classes.<sup>9</sup>

In the U.S., an estimated 20 percent of elementary schools have dropped physical education in favor of extended classroom time.<sup>10</sup> According to the Center of Education Policy, 20 percent of school systems have decreased time for recess, with cuts averaging 50 minutes per week.<sup>11</sup> Another recent study in *Pediatrics* used a national data set of 11,000 children and found that 30

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<sup>5</sup> Dillon, Sam. "Obama to Seek Sweeping Change in 'No Child' Law" *The New York Times*. (2010), <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/01/education/01child.html?adxnnl=1&fta=y&adxnnlx=1296676847-ZtH7mRVR37MpoFn2U/7P7A>. (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Dillon, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Patte Barth, "Time out: Is recess in danger?" Center on Education Policy, <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Organizing-a-school/Time-out-Is-recess-in-danger/default.aspx> (accessed Feb 2, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Barth, "Time out: Is recess in danger?"

<sup>9</sup> Steven Rose, "Schools cut times for eating, playing: Officials say aim is to raise scores," *The Boston Globe*, November 7, 2004, [http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2004/11/07/schools\\_cut\\_times\\_for\\_eating\\_playing?pg=full](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2004/11/07/schools_cut_times_for_eating_playing?pg=full) (accessed February 14, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> David Satcher, "Healthy and Ready to Learn." *Educational Leadership* 63 (2005): 26-30.

<sup>11</sup> McMurrer, Jennifer. "Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects, Center on Education Policy, 2008." <http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=309> (accessed February 2, 2011).

percent of third-graders had fewer than 15 minutes of recess a day.<sup>12</sup> The trend of children's exercise habits has also decreased; fewer than 25 percent of all children participate in 30 minutes of daily fitness.<sup>13</sup> These trends continue with students through high school, where fewer than 30 percent of students attend physical education classes every day.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Effects of Cutting Lunch and Recess**

In her report, "Recess in Elementary School: What Does the Research Say?" Olga S. Jarrett discussed the research on the importance of recess and its relationship to a child's learning, social development, and health. Recess, the research suggests, serves the important purpose of a break.

In experimental studies [a number of researchers] found that elementary school children became progressively inattentive when recess was delayed, resulting in more active play when recess occurred. Another experimental study found fourth-graders were more on-task and less fidgety in the classroom on days when they had had recess, with hyperactive children among those who benefited the most.<sup>15</sup>

A research study conducted in French and Canadian schools over a period of four years showed positive effects of time spent in physical activity.<sup>16</sup>

Spending one-third of the school day in formal and less formal physical education including art and music resulted in increased fitness, improved attitudes, and slight improvements in test scores. These results are consistent with the findings of a meta-analysis of nearly 200 studies on the effect of exercise on cognitive functioning that suggest that physical activity supports learning.<sup>17</sup>

Recess is also instrumental in social development. For some students it is the only daily opportunity for informal social interaction. "Making choices and developing rules for play involves the development of social skills....In open settings, children must learn to resolve conflicts to keep the game going, resulting in low levels of aggression on the playground."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Barros, Romina M., Ellen J. Silver, and Ruth E.K. Stein. "School Recess and Group Classroom Behavior." *Pediatrics* 123 (2009): 431-436, <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/123/2/431> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Satcher, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Satcher, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Jarrett, Olga S. "Recess in Elementary School: What does the research say?" *ERIC Educational Reports* <http://www.ateachabout.com/pdf/RecessinElementarySchool.pdf> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Martens, F.L., Salazar, W., Landers, D.M., Petruzzello, S.J., Han, M., and Nowell, P. "Daily physical education—a boon to Canadian elementary schools." *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* 53 (1982): 55-58 <http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-2/recess.html> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Etnier, J.L. "The influence of physical fitness and exercise upon cognitive functioning: A meta-analysis." *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 19 (1997): 249-277.

<sup>18</sup> Jarrett, 2011.

Cutting recess time also has serious implications for child health. "Inactivity, according to research...is associated with the tripling of childhood obesity since 1970, accompanied by increases in health problems such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol."<sup>19</sup>

### **State Struggles**

Students in the Iowa City School District in Iowa City, Iowa now have fifteen minutes for lunch, including standing in the lunch line for their food.<sup>20</sup> Teachers have observed that students often rush through their lunches, sometimes only eat their favorite foods, and throw their healthy foods away in order to get to recess faster.<sup>21</sup> As a result, some Iowa schools are experimenting with having recess before lunch so that students do not rush their eating.<sup>22</sup>

In 2004, the state of Georgia eliminated both recess and physical education requirements when it raised its academic standards. As a result, Representative Sally Harrell proposed a bill that would mandate 15-minute recesses at the public schools.<sup>23</sup> This bill did not pass in its entirety, and was amended to allow schools the option of having recess, but did not require them to give the students a break during the school day.<sup>24</sup>

### **What States Are Doing**

#### **State Mandates**

The California Education Code Section 33350(c) states that the California Department of Education shall "provide daily recess periods for elementary school pupils, featuring time for unstructured but supervised play."<sup>25</sup> The California Superintendent's Task Force on Obesity, Type 2 Diabetes, and Cardiovascular Disease recommended in 2006 that, "schools provide kindergarten and grades 1-6 students with opportunities for physical activity breaks at least once per 120 minutes of instruction."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jarret, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Gregg Hennigan, "Enough Time for Lunch Time?" (2010) *Gregg Hennigan/SourceMedia Group News* <http://www.easterniowaschools.com/2010/11/22/enough-time-for-lunch-time/> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Hennigan, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Hennigan, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Kelderman, Eric. "Childhood obesity: states neglect phys ed." (2004) *Stateline* <http://www.stateline.org/live/ViewPage.action?siteNodId=136&languageId=1&contentId=15615> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Tartamella, Lisa. *Generation extra large : rescuing our children from an epidemic of obesity*. 1 ed. New York: Basic Books, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> California State Board of Education. "Physical Education Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Twelfth Grade." Volume (2009), 10, <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fd/documents/pestandards.pdf> (accessed February 2, 2011)

<sup>26</sup> California State Board of Education, 10.

## Extending the School Day

Massachusetts was the first state in the country to enact a state policy to extend the school day as a means of improving academic achievement. The Expanded Learning Time Initiative (ELT) has exhibited promising results. "Over the past year ELT schools gained in proficiency at double the rate of the state in ELA and math and gained at nearly five times the state in science."<sup>27</sup> A few years ago, Boston's Clarence Edwards Middle School was a struggling school, with math scores among the lowest in the city. In 2006 the school became a pioneer in taking part of the ELT, which included 300 more hours of learning and personalized instruction in the school year. By 2009, the school became one of the highest performing in Boston, and test scores vastly improved across the board. Before the ELT was initiated, the school day ended at 1:30 and lunch lasted for 20 minutes. After the ELT was initiated, a sample student schedule reveals that the school day ends at 4:15, with 25 minutes for lunch and a 15 minute snack time. The students at Clarence Edwards Middle School were allotted 20 additional minutes of break time. After the change in schedule, due to the extended school days, test scores vastly improved.<sup>28</sup>

Many states are considering extending school days to make more time for studying the primary subjects that students will be nationally tested on. Some are debating whether to lengthen the school year or the school day. "Longer school days can mean adding the equivalent of '35 extra days of schooling each year,'" and a survey has found 83% of parents and 72% of employees prefer a longer school day over a longer year.<sup>29</sup> Longer school days also appear to be less expensive than longer school years.<sup>30</sup> The Center for Public Education has suggested several ways of reorganizing school schedules to make learning time more engaging and more efficient.<sup>31</sup>

## Farm to School Programs

Berkeley public schools have adopted a new pilot program called the "Berkeley School Lunch Initiative" in efforts to integrate nutrition into the curriculum. In this program, students spend time in a school instructional garden once every three weeks where they "learn where food comes from, about nutrition, natural cycles and processes, and the importance of conserving water and soil."<sup>32</sup> After harvesting, students are then given cooking lessons emphasizing that

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<sup>27</sup> Mass 2020, "Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative 2010 Progress Report," p. 8. , accessed February 14, 2011, <http://www.mass2020.org/files/file/2010%20Mass%202020%20Progress%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Mass 2020, "Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time Initiative 2010 Progress Report."

<sup>29</sup> Chmelynski, Carol. "Starting Schools in August." *Education Digest* 71 (2006): Page 42.

<sup>30</sup> Silva, E. "On the clock: Rethinking the Way Schools Use Time." *Education Sector*, January 2007: pages 7-10. [http://www.heartland.org/policybot/results/22601/On the Clock Rethinking the Way Schools Use Time.html](http://www.heartland.org/policybot/results/22601/On_the_Clock_Rethinking_the_Way_Schools_Use_Time.html) (accessed Feb 2 2011).

<sup>31</sup> O'Brien, Eileen, M. "Making time: What research says about re-organizing school schedules, 2006." Center for Public Education. <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Organizing-a-school/Copy-of-Making-time-At-a-glance/Making-time-What-research-says-about-re-organizing-school-schedules.GMEditor.html> (accessed Feb 2 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Michael K. Stone, "Rethinking Lunchtime: Making Lunch an Integral Part of Education," in *Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability*. (Watershed Media, The University of California Press, 2009).

healthy food *does* taste good. These garden and cooking programs were funded by the Network for Healthy California, which channels federal nutrition education funds to schools with over 50% students qualifying for the National School Lunch Program subsidies. By making food education part of the curriculum, Berkeley public schools were able to *add* 10 minutes to their lunch and recess break rather than *reduce* minutes. After 25 minutes of recess, students now eat for 20 minutes. During the final 10 minutes of lunch, teachers join the lunchroom, finding an opportunity to teach students to see food and lunchtime as an educational part of their day.<sup>33</sup>

Other states have similar programs, including “Farm-to-School,” which have had positive evaluations thus far.<sup>34</sup> In Vermont, Food Education Every Day (VT FEED) has worked with schools across the state to development a food, farm, and nutrition based education. For financial support, Vermont schools could be encouraged to apply for a grant by this March 15, 2011, when “up to 40 Vermont gardens will be able to use \$1000 mini-grants this spring to expand school community gardens.”<sup>35</sup>

## National Initiatives

In addition to state initiatives, there are also national programs that are aiming to restore programs like recess in the school day. One such campaign, sponsored mainly by the National PTA and Cartoon Network, but developed with participation from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Education Association (NEA), the National Association for Sport & Physical Education (NASPE), the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, New Leaders for New Schools and Health Powers, called “Rescuing Recess” is aimed at “recogniz[ing] unstructured break time as an essential element of the school day.”<sup>36</sup> The program has pledged more than \$300 thousand dollars in grants to schools and \$50 thousand for the school who most actively participates in the program.<sup>37</sup>

## Four-Day School Weeks

Another option that many states have begun to consider is implementing a four-day school week. The National Conference of State Legislatures found that 20 states currently have schools that are operating on a four-day school week and that six additional states have legislation that

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<sup>33</sup> Stone, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Joshi, Anapusha and Andrea Misako Azuma. "Bearing Fruit: Farm to School Program Evaluation Resources and Recommendations, 2009." <http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfi/publications/BF%20full%20report.pdf> (accessed Feb 2 2011).

<sup>35</sup> "Some Vt. gardens will be eligible for \$1k grants, 2011." *The Boston Globe* [http://www.boston.com/news/local/vermont/articles/2011/01/22/some\\_vt\\_gardens\\_will\\_be\\_eligible\\_for\\_1k\\_grants/?rss\\_id=Boston.com+--+Vermont+news](http://www.boston.com/news/local/vermont/articles/2011/01/22/some_vt_gardens_will_be_eligible_for_1k_grants/?rss_id=Boston.com+--+Vermont+news) (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Time Warner. "Recess is at Risk, New Campaign Comes to the Rescue, 2006" <http://www.timewarner.com/corp/newsroom/pr/0,20812,1172697,00.html> (accessed February 2, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Time Warner. "Recess is at Risk, New Campaign Comes to the Rescue, 2006" <http://www.timewarner.com/corp/newsroom/pr/0,20812,1172697,00.html> (accessed February 2, 2011).

allows for a four-day school week, but do not currently any schools that implement such a calendar.<sup>38</sup>

In a report by the Center for Education Policy, Applied Research and Evaluation, at the University of Southern Maine Christine Donis-Keller and David L. Silvernail listed the drawbacks of the four day school week would include lengthened school days for four days out of the week, which there has been concern expressed that this may lead to student exhaustion, possibly not meeting requirements for the number of hours school must be in session, and difficulty for parents to find adequate child care for the students on the additional day off.<sup>39</sup> However, they listed advantages of the program as improved morale and attendance by both students and teachers, fewer classroom disruptions, increased efficiency in class room time, increased time students are able to spend on extra-circular activities and as a result increased participation in extra-circular activities due to the additional time allotted for them, increased flexibility with planning for snow days and other unexpected school closures, budgetary savings, and overall satisfaction by “stakeholders” in the education system.<sup>40</sup>

While there does not appear to be any direct correlation between the institution of a four-day work week and lengthened time allocated for unstructured student activity, the lengthened school day would require more time for such activities and allow for a whole extra day of independent student activity.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that as a result of No Child Left Behind, schools are under more pressure to deliver higher test scores, and thus are making children spend more time in the classroom and less time on the playground or in the lunch room. While academic achievement is paramount to maintaining the funding provided by the federal government, research evidence suggests that it is also important for schools to take into account children’s mental and physical well-being. As evidenced, many states are considering these issues and doing everything from passing simple mandates to implementing innovative and groundbreaking solutions to their scheduling woes.

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Prepared in response to a request by Senator Philip Baruth of Chittenden County by Luke Martin, Allyson Perleoni, Julie Seger, Kristen Skager, Alexander Rosenblatt, and Maximillian McNamara, under the supervision of graduate student Kate Fournier and Professor Anthony Gierzynski on February 15, 2011.

Disclaimer: This report has been compiled by undergraduate students at the University of Vermont under the supervision of Professor Anthony Gierzynski. The material contained in the report does not reflect the official policy of the University of Vermont.

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<sup>38</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures. “Four-Day School Weeks.” <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=12934> (accessed Feb 2 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Donis-Keller, Chris, and David L. Silvernail. "Research Brief: A Review of the Evidence on the Four Day School Week, 2009." <http://usm.maine.edu/cepare/pdf/CEPARE%20Brief%20on%20the%204-day%20school%20week%202.10.pdf> (accessed Feb 2 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Donis-Keller and Silvernail, 2009.