

## **Recess *Before* Lunch Can Mean Happier, Healthier Kids**

**Recess follows lunch almost as predictably as four follows three, because it always has been that way. Principals who have put recess first, though, have noticed children eat more and behave better after lunch.**

For centuries, recess has followed lunch with the consistency and predictability of one season following another. Lunch-recess is part of the natural order of the education universe, with recess secure in its place.

More administrators, though, are starting to challenge that static schedule. Some principals who moved recess *before* lunch discovered that not only do students eat more and waste less food, but behaviour improved and teachers gained instructional time. They say that students used to come in [from recess] hot, sweaty, and fired up. It would take teachers five or six minutes to get them back to a teachable mode. We've reclaimed five to ten minutes of instruction time every day.

### **SCHEDULE BENEFITS EVERYONE**

Two elementary schools that switched recess and lunch also reported healthier, happier students. Post-recess ailments were among the reasons North Ranch Elementary School in Scottsdale, Arizona, changed its schedule. "We got the idea [of recess before lunch] from the school nurse who had been to a conference," said principal Dr. Sarah Hartley. "It gets very hot here, and the kids were eating and then playing in the heat. The nurse was reporting a lot of headaches and stomach aches after lunch." Four years after North Ranch began serving lunch after recess, the change seems to agree with everyone.

"The teachers love it," Hartley told Education World. "They don't feel like they have to cool down the children after lunch. In the past it could take 15 minutes to settle the kids down after recess. So we found a lot of academic time. We also saw a drop in the number of referrals to the nurse, and the cafeteria reported more kids eating and less food being thrown away." North Ranch was the first elementary school in its district to make the change; now 16 out of 31 elementary schools have switched.

"Little kids tend to nibble and dump," Borgioli-Yoder said. "When they play first, they tend to eat more. They play and get their energy out and then settle down. The kids really like it."

### **STUDENTS ARE MORE FULL, MORE RELAXED**

Entrenched as it is in the school culture, the lunch-recess sequence never made much sense from a health standpoint. Few adults eat a meal and then immediately exercise, because they know what could happen. The lure of going out to play also causes some students to rush through or skip their lunches, which can lead to stomach aches or restless, hungry children later in the day.

Katie Bark, a dietician who is a member of the Montana Team Nutrition Program, said her group has been researching the affects of holding recess before lunch for several years. The project is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture; one of the directives from the USDA is for schools to develop a healthy nutritional environment. The team also noted that when students come in from the playground, the noise level in the cafeteria is high. Then they settle down. "And if they had a dispute on the playground, they tend to forget about it when they get to class."

Still, changing a tradition as deeply rooted as lunch-recess can take time. "This was a huge change for these schools to do," Bark said. "We're trying to learn from these schools. Then we want to develop a guide for success."

## **PART OF OVERALL CHANGE**

One of the schools in the Montana study, Central Middle School, experienced dramatic shifts in student behaviour after changing its schedule. Moving lunch after recess was part of an effort to create a more healthful environment in the school. When students had the chance to eat more slowly and more thoughtfully, they brought more food and ate more, and disciplinary actions decreased by 60 percent over a three-year period. "Students are less restless, more attentive, and we have fewer outbursts in the afternoon," Anderson said. Over that same three-year period, the school also reduced the amount of plate waste by 50 percent. Other benefits included:

- After-lunch referrals to the principal's office (for classroom and other behaviour problems) also decreased. They went from 96 referrals (in 2001-02) to just 22 referrals in the first eight months of the 2002-03 school year.
- Teachers reported increased attentiveness in their classes after lunch; they gained about 10 minutes of instructional time per class.

## **WHAT ABOUT THOSE DIRTY HANDS?**

The primary adjustment needed if lunch and recess are switched is building in time for students to wash their hands before eating. At Central and North Ranch, dispensers with hand sanitizing liquid were installed, so students can clean their hands as they enter the cafeteria. "We've also noticed a decrease in the number of colds," since installing the hand sanitizers, according to Anderson.