

More recess time, please!

Ensuring that children have multiple breaks from learning each day is a core tenet of education in Shanghai.

By Rong Chang and Fanni Liu Coward



“How much recess time does your school have for students?” a Chinese-American parent asked the principal of a school in which she was considering enrolling her 6-year-old son.

“Our students get recess twice a week,” the principal proudly replied.

Alarmed, the parent probed further. “Do students get more breaks between classes?”

“Well,” the principal said, “each student can use the restroom or get a drink of water with the teacher’s permission. The teacher will let kids watch an educational video sometimes, too.”

Disappointed, the parent thanked the principal for the tour and enrolled her son in another school that had daily recess.

Like many immigrant Chinese-Americans, this parent was accustomed to the Chinese school schedule, in which students have a 10-minute recess time for every 40 minutes of instruction, excluding the lunch break and “nap time” right after lunch. In other words, this parent expected at least 60 minutes of recess each day for her child. She simply couldn’t understand why the school would expect her young son to remain focused on his lessons for the whole day when most adults are themselves unable to stay focused for even a one-hour presentation.

It may come as a surprise, but in Shanghai, China, education policy states that each elementary-level

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What can the U.S. learn from

SHANGHAI?

► Recess offers children a needed break from academics, which doesn't hamper their ability to learn and may enhance their ability to learn.



course should last only 35 minutes. Chinese educators believe children are too young to sustain their concentration and motivation for long periods of time. Many East Asian countries including Korea, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and Japan have similar policies. Many American kids, however, get about 26 minutes of recess per day, including lunch break and snack time (Bornstein, 2011).

Benefits of recess

Researchers have identified many benefits of recess:

Increases learning. As with other types of play, recess allows children opportunities to learn and promotes children's intellectual and emotional development. Recess interrupts long periods of learning, which can help elevate students' energy and improve concentration for studying. In Finland, for example, the school day has a considerable amount of recess time — 75 minutes per day — and teachers give students a 15-minute break after every lesson.

Helps classroom management. Researchers (Jones, Bailey, & Jacob, 2014) found that students who have strong attention, focus, and motivation are less disruptive during instruction and are better able to follow teachers' directions. Becoming distracted and less involved is natural as class time passes. At such moments, the teacher's instructional techniques alone may not be enough to sustain students' on-task behaviors.

There are probably lots of plausible reasons why recess helps. This unstructured time may help with

classroom management because it serves as a reset button on children's emotional and cognitive timers. Recess may help students avoid cognitive overload and the temptation to create distractions during instruction. Attention and motivation can be recovered after a real sense of mind rest. A case in point, a school in New Zealand noticed a drop in bullying after adding more recess time (Klein, 2014).

Fosters social development. Recess also gives students time for social interactions. In the unstructured space of recess, students have to be able to initiate, negotiate, cooperate, share, and build relationships with one another — skills that are highly valued in the adult world but that often are quite different from work or play under adult supervision and control. For example, in an unstructured recess time students have to figure out on their own if they want to play with others, who they want to play with, and what they want to play. They also need to decide whether to continue the play plan or ditch it for an alternative. If they continue a plan, they would have to find a way to sustain the relationship among peers. Without adult interference, students engage in important social interactions completely on their own.

Promotes physical well-being. There are also physical benefits to recess, including improved fitness and opportunities to practice movement and motor skills (Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2010). Prolonged sitting in a closed room may be harmful for one's body and could result in health problems such as obesity, myopia, and even blood problems. Recess promotes opportunities for movements that increase health benefits — standing, walking, and running, even as students are unaware of the exercise they're getting (James, 2011). This is different from physical education classes, which have specific curriculum goals and assessments with teacher supervision.

As the demand of higher standards and more rigorous curricula accumulate, schools are eliminating recess (Ginsburg, 2007). But does more recess time mean lower student achievement? Is it helpful to decrease the amount of recess for higher grade levels such as middle school and high school?

Recess in Shanghai

Contrary to what many may believe, Shanghai students have ample recess time. (See Table 1.) For elementary students in Shanghai, the length of recess time is almost 40% of a whole school day. Recess is slightly less for middle schools and high schools.

Giving children that much time away from academics every day doesn't seem to have hurt their ability to perform well on the most-watched international comparison exam, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Since 2011,

In Shanghai, students have a 10-minute recess time for every 40 minutes of instruction, excluding the lunch break and "nap time" right after lunch.

TABLE 1.
Length and frequency of recess and academic courses in each school day of six sample schools in Shanghai

Grade level	Unstructured recess		Structured recess		Total recess		Academic courses		Total school time in minutes	Recess length percentage
	Length (in minutes)	Frequency	Length (in minutes)	Frequency	Length (in minutes)	Frequency	Length (in minutes)	Frequency		
GRADE 1	135	6	20	3	155	9	245	7	400	39%
GRADE 3	105	7	60	4	165	11	245	7	410	40%
GRADE 7	110	9	45	5	155	14	360	9	515	30%
GRADE 9	100	9	80	4	180	13	360	9	540	33%
GRADE 10	150	10	10	2	160	12	425	11	585	27%
GRADE 12	120	9	70	5	190	14	420	11	610	31%

Shanghai has received top honors across the board in reading, math, and science on PISA. In the last round of the PISA, 15-year-old students in Shanghai mastered up to two additional years of mathematics content compared to students in Massachusetts, the highest-scoring U.S. state (OECD, 2013).

But Shanghai students have a heavier academic load than American students. Shanghai students tend to spend more time at school during the middle and high school years. Class time increases from 120 minutes per day in middle school to 200 minutes in secondary schools. However, the higher the grade level, the greater the frequency at which recess is provided. In addition, structured recess time such as daily morning exercises, classroom exercises, and eye exercises are all increased in higher grades in Shanghai but never at the expense of unstructured time.

Comparisons with the U.S.

We found some startling contrasts between Shanghai and the U.S. First, the percentage of recess time students have throughout a typical school day is consistently less in the U.S. across all school levels. Second, as the school day increases, Shanghai

students have more frequent recess, while American students see a decline in recess time. Similarly, as Shanghai students advance in grade level, they continue to have access to recess time, but American students do not.

Even more interesting is how the two systems manage transition times. For American students, transition times are typically used to change classrooms and may last as little as five minutes. In Shanghai, however, teachers change classrooms while students remain in place, which means students can more quickly access down time during the school day. Unlike American students, this difference allows Chinese students to use their transition time better to enjoy authentic recess.

Finally, the two countries use lunchtime differently. In Chinese schools, two kinds of activities are provided during lunchtime: eating and napping. Elementary students have about an hour for lunch, and students in upper grades have about a half hour for eating. After that, students at both levels are required to take a “noon break” (午休) for about 30 minutes to prepare for afternoon classes. This noon break period gives students time to nap or simply rest at

TABLE 2.
Descriptive statistics of daily recess in the U.S. and Shanghai*

	Elementary level		Middle level		High level	
	U.S.	Shanghai	U.S.	Shanghai	U.S.	Shanghai
FREQUENCY OF RECESS PER DAY	3	10	7	13.5	7	13
LENGTH OF RECESS (IN MINUTES)	95	160	54	167.5	73	175
TOTAL CLASS TIME (IN MINUTES)	430	405	460	527.5	500	597.5
RECESS LENGTH PERCENTAGE	22%	40%	12%	32%	15%	29%

*Comparisons are of six schools in China and three in the U.S.

their seat. Compare this to the U.S. where children typically have 30 minutes to eat and then return to engage in afternoon classes without any other breaks.

Conclusion

Students in Shanghai have more time for recess and structured exercise time throughout the day, yet these students are among the highest achieving in the world. This challenges the conventional wisdom that reducing recess is a way to increase academic achievement. Even though increased instructional time is a priority for sustaining academic performance in Chinese schools, cutting recess time is not a viable solution.

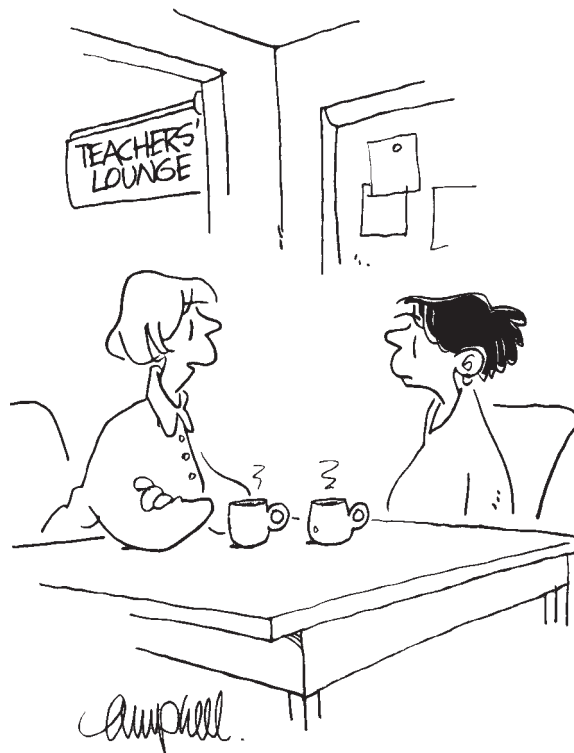
In Shanghai, teachers change classrooms while students remain in place, which means students can more quickly access down time during the school day.

One might ask, “How in the world do they find time to teach then?” The answer is at once simple and complex. In the U.S., teachers are required to finish teaching and students often finish learning during school hours. In contrast, in Shanghai, school time often is for teaching only, and students are expected to review content and strengthen their skills after school. Chinese schools, especially in higher-grade levels, encourage students to take self-study courses offered at the school during evening hours, normally from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. In this way, there is still time for recess during the school day and extended school time in the evenings.

We share the sentiments of Keeler (2015) when he stated, “Recess can be a place for creation, collaboration, construction, and rich social engagement” (p. 21). Recess can have tremendous benefits for students, and those in the top schools in Shanghai bear out this point. Shanghai schools safeguard recess time as well as learning time for students. Policy makers concerned about increasing student achievement often attempt to do so by removing structured and unstructured times for students; this is contrary to the advice of educators with the best record of achievement in the world. Increasing learning hours in order to improve academic performance in schools should be considered but not in isolation. Perhaps the Chinese solution of recess coupled with extended school day won’t work in an America system, but clearly removing recess won’t either. **K**

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“I tried ‘delete,’ but they’re all still in my classroom.”