

CAPITOL RESEARCH

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STATE POLICIES ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN SCHOOLS

This research brief, the first in a two-part series on physical activity in schools, provides a general overview of physical activity legislation in the states. The second brief in this series will discuss the different arguments regarding how recess and physical education should be structured.

Over the last 30 years, obesity has tripled among children and youth ages 6-19 years old, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Healthy eating and regular exercise play a crucial role in preventing obesity. But state leaders increasingly are focused on addressing obesity and promoting physical activity in schools through policies such as mandatory recess.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines recess as “regularly scheduled period in the school day for physical activity and play that is monitored by trained staff or volunteers.” The American Academy of Pediatrics finds recess not only offers physical benefits but cognitive, social and emotional benefits as well. It gives students the time to play, imagine, think and socialize in ways otherwise not attainable in a classroom.

Policies recommending students engage in physical activity during the school week exist in most states, but few states have formal laws. The National Institute on Child Health and Human Development found schools are more likely to have the recommended amount of physical education and recess each week if they are located in states with laws either mandating or encouraging physical education, or PE, or recess. However, the study also found that PE time was inversely related to recess time in the schools studied, suggesting schools replace one form of physical activity for another rather than providing the suggested amount of both.

State policy can act as a valuable catalyst for promoting adequate levels of physical activity. By mandating or encouraging PE and recess through legislation, policymakers can likely increase physical activity opportunities available for students.

But some educators and policymakers have concerns about physical education mandates for public schools and their impact on academic instruction. Increased emphasis on test scores has a direct correlation on schools increasing student time in the classroom.



The No Child Left Behind, or NCLB, Act of 2002, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, for example, put pressure on school administrators to improve their standardized test scores each year. The Center on Education Policy found that in response to NCLB schools shifted large chunks of classroom time to English and math and cut time spent on science, art, social studies and recess/PE.

But other education experts disagree that additional class time increases academic performance in schools.

“It’s a common misconception that keeping children in the classroom will boost test scores and maintain focus on studying, but no research supports this idea,” Wichita State University Education Professor Rick Pappas, a leading researcher on the benefits of recess, told the Wichita Eagle. “Kids behave better, they listen better, they’re more focused (after recess), and all that goes toward learning.”

In response to many schools cutting recess time, some education researchers are focusing on the



Table 1. Changes in Instructional Time in Elementary Schools Since 2001-02

Subject or Period	Percentage of All Districts That Increased Time	Percentage of All Districts That Decreased Time	Average Increase (Minutes per Week)	Average Decrease (Minutes per Week)
English language arts	58%		141	
Mathematics	45%		89	
Social studies		36%		76
Science		28%		75
Art and music		16%		57
Recess		20%		50
Physical education		9%		40
Lunch		5%		*

SOURCE: CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY, FEBRUARY 2007, DISTRICT SURVEY, ITEM 19

importance of recess as a scheduled part of the school day. A small number of schools in the Dallas-Fort Worth area are piloting a program developed by Texas Christian University Professor Debbie Rhea. In 2014, Rhea founded the LiiNK project—Let’s Inspire Innovation ‘N Kids— which strives to monitor the impact of multiple recesses during the day. She modeled LiiNK after similar programs in Finland that offer 15 minutes of recess for every hour of instruction. Initial outcomes of the program include students demonstrating fewer discipline and bullying problems, less anxiousness, improved self-concept, and better attendance and academic achievement.

State legislative action on physical activity in public schools

The legislation passed by states with physical activity requirements either describe the policy as a recess requirement or a general activity requirement.

States with recess requirements are:

- **Connecticut:** All elementary students will have 20 minutes a day of supervised recess, preferably outdoors.
- **Indiana:** Daily physical activity for students in elementary school. May include the use of recess.
- **Missouri:** Minimum of one 20-minute recess period for children in elementary school.
- **Rhode Island:** Minimum of 20 consecutive minutes of free play for every elementary school student.
- **Virginia:** Elementary schools will provide students with daily recess during the regular school year.

States with general activity requirements include:

- **Arkansas:** 90 minutes of physical activity each week (K-6).
- **Colorado:** 600 minutes of physical activity each month for full-time elementary students. May include: exercise programs, fitness breaks, recess, field trips that include physical activity, classroom activities that include physical activity and physical education classes.
- **Iowa:** 30 minutes of physical activity each day for grade K-5.
- **Louisiana:** 30 minutes of vigorous physical activity for grades K-8.
- **North Carolina:** 30 minutes of daily physical activity for K-8 students on days when PE is not a part of a student’s schedule.
- **South Carolina:** Minimum of 150 minutes per week (60 of which coming from PE) for K-5 students.
- **Tennessee:** 90 minutes of physical activity per week K-8.
- **Texas:** Daily physical activity for a minimum of 30 minutes K-5 .

A number of additional states have legislation that includes recommendations, rather than mandates, for recess and other types of physical activities. Others choose to let local school districts develop their own policies.

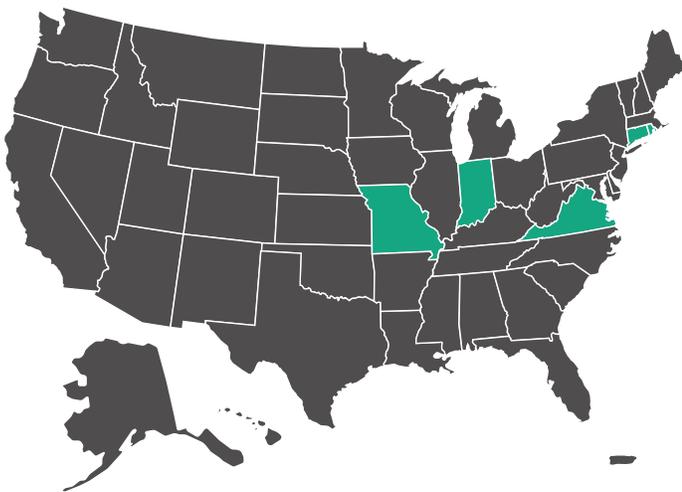
Legislators in Arizona, Florida, New Jersey and Rhode Island have all debated over the past year whether to mandate recess in their elementary schools.

- The New Jersey Legislature passed a bill requiring recess in elementary schools, but it was vetoed by Gov. Chris Christie.
- The Florida House of Representatives passed [HB 833](#), which required local school districts to provide recess daily, but the bill did not pass in a Senate committee.

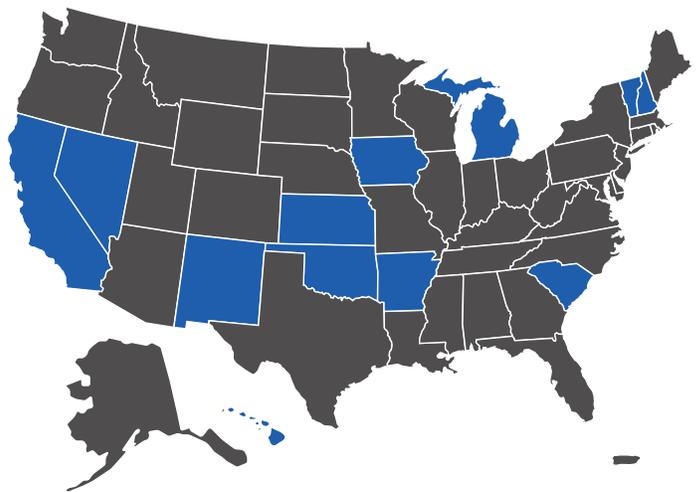
- Rhode Island passed [SB 2669](#) in 2016 that requires elementary schools to provide at least 20 minutes of recess each day. The bill also prevents teachers and administrators from taking recess away as punishment for students.
- In the 2017 legislative session, the [Arizona](#) Legislature will consider a bill that would require at least 50 minutes of mandatory recess. The bill unanimously passed the House Education Committee on Jan. 30 and is set to be presented to the House floor during the 2017 legislative session.

Of the 39 states have formal laws requiring physical education in elementary schools, 19 states specify time limits that students must participate in physical education, and more than half allow exemptions or substitutions that release students from the requirement.

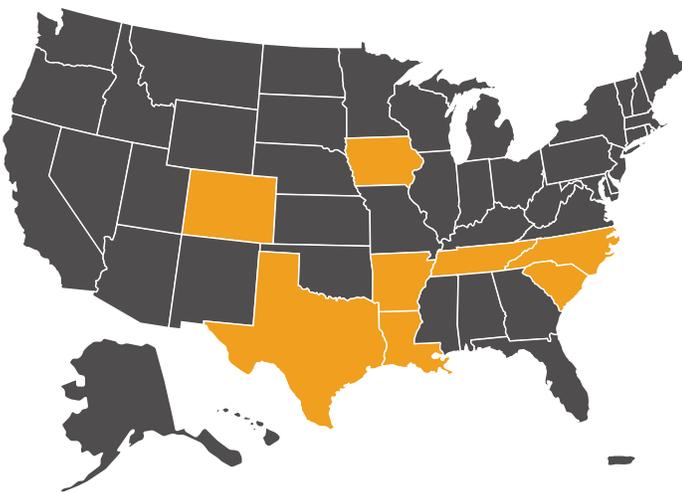
STATE REQUIRED RECESS



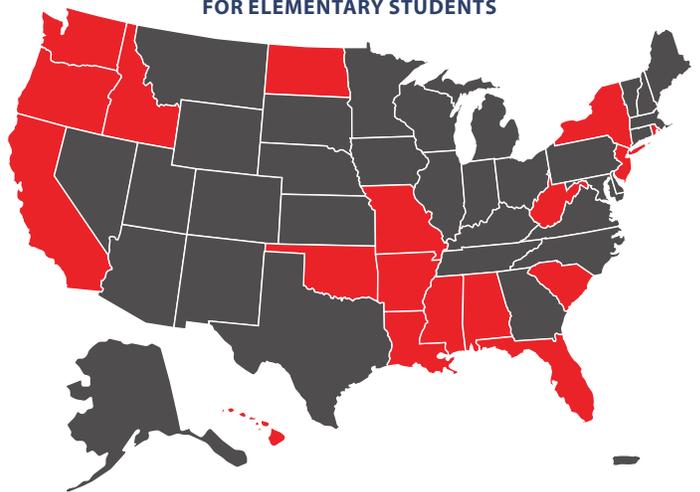
STATE RECESS RECOMMENDED



GENERAL ACTIVITY REQUIREMENTS



STATES HAS A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TIME REQUIREMENT FOR ELEMENTARY STUDENTS



SOURCES:
<http://www.ecs.org/ec-content/uploads/SIRRecess.pdf>
http://www.shapeamerica.org/advocacy/son/2016/upload/Shape-of-the-Nation-2016_web.pdf
https://nccd.cdc.gov/NPAO_DTM/IndicatorSummary.aspx?category=71&indicator=78&year=2012&yearId=16

National Physical Activity Initiatives Gaining Momentum in the States

- Children should have 60 minutes of physical activity each day ([Center for Disease Control, American Academy of Pediatrics](#))
- Recess is an essential component of education and should be part of the curriculum for preschool through elementary school ([National Association of Early Childhood Specialist in State Departments of Education](#))
- All elementary school children should be provided at least one daily period of recess of at least 20 minutes ([National Association for Sport and Physical Education](#))
- Children need both Physical Education and Recess ([National Association for Sport and Physical Education, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of State Boards of Education](#))
- Recess should not be taken away as a punishment ([American Academy of Pediatrics, National Association for Sport and Physical Education](#))
- Principals should promote the development and maintenance of appropriately supervised free play for children during the school day. ([National Association of Elementary School Principals](#))



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