

It's Not Called Recess Anymore:
Safe, Healthy and Productive
Break Time in Middle School

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Executive Summary

Developmentally, middle school students are navigating major physical changes, identity formation, assertion of independence from parents and family, and creation of social relationships with peers and adults outside their family. These changes happen quickly during the middle school years and the incoming sixth graders often look and act very differently than the eighth graders. Schools and other community-based settings can support adolescents' positive development through intentional programming and creating environments that attend to their developmental needs. Break time – brunch and lunch – are times during the school day that can elicit positive developmental outcomes and at the same time help students to get physical activity and have a break from class work.

Focusing on the three middle schools in Santa Cruz City Schools and Live Oak School District, this report explores student and adult experiences with brunch and lunch. Through interviews, observations, and a student survey, the research generated the following findings in brief:

- Schools offer alternative spaces for students to play and socialize during breaks, and have activities such as clubs, intramurals, and lunch bunch for those who are interested.
- Adults who supervise break time focus on supporting physical and emotional safety of students. Campus supervisors, in particular, take the time to get to know students so that they can prevent future potential problems.
- Older boys are the most likely group to engage in physical activity and sports during break time, and girls are more likely to socialize than play sports or games at break time. Walking and talking is popular among some girls and boys.
- Sixth grade students are the most likely to spend time in alternative spaces.
- Long lunch lines can limit free time or result in students not eating during break.
- Challenges for students during break time are feeling excluded and not being able to find friends in a busy yard.
- Students report wanting more activities, including some adult-led ones, more and different equipment, and student voice in decision making around break time.

Key takeaways from the research include:

Students need access to more and different types of activities. Particularly for entering sixth graders, girls of all ages, and those who are not interested in playing sports, having alternative spaces and different types of activities, led or supported by adults, can make students feel safe and help them to engage. Adults all acknowledge the importance of this, but are challenged by resource limitations.

Reducing wait times at food lines would improve break time. Exploring options for reducing wait times is one way to improve equity in access to physical activity and other pro-social activities at break time and ensuring students actually eat during the breaks that they have.

Student empowerment during break time could lead to improved engagement. Forming a break time or school climate commission, creating opportunities for meaningful engagement and change, and giving students ownership over their break time experiences are important ways to empower students and boost their development.

Origins of the Middle School Break Time Study

In 2010, the Santa Cruz City Schools Wellness Committee, of which I was a member, identified a need to support a more robust recess time for its elementary students. The Committee had previously been focused on improving the quality of food served at schools and increasing access to meals for low-income students. Committee members felt that the wellness charge included physical activity and fitness in addition to school meals, but also recognized that for elementary students, recess is about more than just physical activity. We formed a subcommittee to identify goals for recess programming and an approach to bring back to the full Committee for consideration.

The recess subcommittee proposed a partnership with the organization Playworks, headquartered in Oakland, to support all four elementary schools in the district. Playworks promotes safe and healthy recess for elementary schools through a focus on: (1) recess yard organization, (2) simple tools for conflict resolution, (3) student engagement through inclusive play and adult participation, (4) supportive play environments, and (5) student leadership. At the time, Playworks' offerings included two options that were aimed primarily at elementary schools with half or more of their students receiving Free and Reduced Price Meals. In 2010, two of the four elementary schools in the district met that criterion, but the subcommittee felt strongly that for equity reasons, all schools should offer the same programming. The subcommittee opted to pursue Playworks' training model (now called Playworks Pro), where staff from Playworks come to Santa Cruz and train district and school administrators, teachers, and staff in the Playworks approach. Santa Cruz City Schools forged a partnership with the Santa Cruz Education Foundation to fund this training.

The Wellness Committee made the argument that having Playworks at all four schools would serve students well as they matriculated into the district's two middle schools. Our thinking was that a common understanding of expectations for the play yard and conflict resolution tools would ease the transition to middle school and result in improvements to the middle school recess yard as well.

In the intervening years, Playworks trained Santa Cruz City Schools administrators, teachers and staff a total of five times. Each of the four elementary schools hired a "recess coach" to lead recess activities and engage with students. Some schools created junior coach programs to provide older elementary students with a leadership role on the play yard. Playworks-style recess programs continue today in the four elementary schools and through this project my research team had the opportunity to observe recess at each school. The results were exceptional: all four Santa Cruz City Schools elementary schools are running strong recess programs that include the Playworks elements that we, as a Wellness Committee, were most

concerned with. One school, DeLaveaga, has contracted individually with Playworks this year and is diving deeper into the model.

At the start of the 2017-18 school year, I approached Santa Cruz City Schools leadership in my role as a faculty member at the University of California, Santa Cruz with the idea to study how middle school recess was operating, now that the first few cohorts of elementary students who grew up with Playworks at school had aged into the district's middle schools. Together we identified the key questions for the study and the data collections. In order to expand the sample and learn about a middle school in which students had not been exposed to Playworks, I approached Live Oak School District. District leaders as well as the principal of the district's one middle school agreed to participate. In my initial conversation with the principal, I learned that Live Oak had also embraced Playworks for its elementary schools, but at a later date than Santa Cruz City Schools. This limits the comparison to a non-Playworks environment, but expands the sample to include more variation in terms of school context and student demographics.

This study is a descriptive examination of recess in middle school and it is not intended to demonstrate the impact of Playworks on middle school recess. Rather, we were interested in learning how middle school students spend their time and the kinds of institutional policies and practices that support them during their “brunch” and “lunch” periods. Coming from the recess-focused world of elementary school, I quickly learned from one of the middle school principals that it's not called recess in middle school; students would be offended to hear the word recess, which they feel they have outgrown.

Focusing on middle school break times, this study aimed to examine:

- safety, engagement and empowerment;
- school resources and supports devoted to planning and staffing;
- student, staff, and administrator perceptions of break time climate; and
- the extent to which elementary school experiences shape middle school break time engagement.

It is important to note that during this same time period, many other reforms were happening in Santa Cruz City Schools and Live Oak School District. Statewide reforms, including the new Local Control Funding Formula and accompanying Local Control Accountability Plan were put in place. Both districts introduced the Common Core State Standards and new curricula to meet these. Live Oak School District introduced an on-site health center at one of its elementary schools and both districts implemented the Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS) into their schools. These and other confounding changes make causal inferences about the role of elementary school recess in middle school experiences. But this rich context is an important backdrop for understanding break time at middle school as it exists today.

The Importance of Break Time for Children and Youth

It is well documented that recess is an important time in the school day for helping elementary school children to learn and develop socially, emotionally and physically. Rather than a break from learning, recess is a time to augment student learning through the multiple benefits that can be accrued during this “break.” The health benefits are unmistakable – recess affords students opportunities for physical activity, which is important to meet the American Academy of Pediatrics’ recommendation of 60 minutes per day of activity.¹ Beyond its effects on physical health, we know that physical activity is associated with improved cognition in children and adults² and there is positive relationship between physical activity and students’ academic outcomes.³ How is this accomplished? Exercise has been shown to help children to concentrate, improve their self-esteem, and reduce depression.⁴

Although many observers focus on the health benefits of recess for children, there are other benefits that are equally important in the school setting, including improvements in student classroom behavior.⁵ Having a well-designed recess in place can reduce the amount of time classroom teachers spend helping their students resolve post-recess problems; one estimate shows teachers can gain as much as the equivalent of a full day’s instruction simply from improving recess.⁶ When students have productive recess time, they can use it to build relationships with peers and adults, especially those whom they may not see in their classrooms. Finally, recess is a key time in the school day that can support students’ development socially and emotionally.⁷ Social and emotional skill development helps students to manage their emotions, show respect and empathy for others and create positive relationships with peers, among other outcomes.⁸ Rather than detract from students’ learning, research has shown that promoting social and emotional learning at school is strongly associated with improvements in academic achievement across grade levels.⁹

Educational leaders are aware of the importance of creating a positive school climate, which reflects a school’s attention to fostering students’ and adults’ feelings of physical and emotional safety, strong student-adult and student-student relationships and student and adult connectedness or engagement to school, as well as creating a supportive academic, disciplinary and physical environment.¹⁰ As with social and emotional learning, reforms aimed at improving school climate are associated with improved academic and mental health outcomes, among others, for students.¹¹ Unfortunately, efforts to enhance school climate and social and emotional learning often overlook recess as a prime opportunity for reinforcing their goals. Yet, the evidence offers strong justification that recess is an important context for these reforms to take root; recess experiences affect both students’ and staff members’ perceptions of school climate.¹²

The literature on recess focuses almost exclusively on elementary school children and is thus inextricably linked to research on play. For young children, play is a critical learning context through which they can learn and practice skills such as conflict resolution, decision-making, compromise and self-regulation. Pediatricians, psychologists, and educators all tout the importance of play time for helping children develop both in and out of school.

Research has similarly shown the benefits of breaks for adults. Adult breaks do not typically involve play, but research shows that taking breaks increases the productivity of adult workers because the time away from work re-energizes them to focus better when they return.¹³ Evidence also points to the detrimental effects of sitting in one place for long periods of time; medical professionals now recommend that adults who are seated for their jobs take a break and move around every 30 minutes.¹⁴

The experiences and effects of breaks for adolescents in school settings, who are developmentally neither children nor adults, is not as well documented. There is a very limited literature that discusses what happens in middle school break times. For instance, a study from 1992 compares students as they transition from elementary to middle school through observations of their recess time.¹⁵ The author finds that middle school students are more likely to play rule based games (e.g., sports) and that middle school girls, in particular, are more likely to be engaged in socializing activities than play. In this study, students did not mix much across age or gender groups, and the study concludes that behaviors of older boys are mainly responsible for this. The majority of research that considers what happens during adolescents' school breaks focuses on specific problems, such as bullying¹⁶ and social isolation,¹⁷ but not the underlying contexts, policies and practices that affect their break time experiences. Social isolation is a serious problem that has reverberating mental and physical health consequences, and middle school-based programs do exist to help schools and students work against it.¹⁸ In addition, a substantial body of literature focuses on the importance of school connectedness.¹⁹ Recommendations to schools to improve student connectedness for adolescents often center around teachers and classrooms. There is little focus on break times as important places where peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult relationships can be formed and maintained, but as is the case with elementary school recess, these spaces outside of traditional classrooms can play an important role in how students see themselves fitting into their school environment.

A Developmental Framework for Understanding Middle School Break Time

Middle school students are thought to be in the early adolescent developmental stage, roughly ages 11 to 14. During this time, they are developing rapidly and, although they are in a common age group and school, there may be drastic developmental differences between the oldest and youngest of this group. During adolescence, youth are developing in four ways: physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially. Although one might assume that intellectual development happens in classrooms and social development happens in after-school programs, it is actually the case that this development happens in all contexts where youth dwell. It is therefore especially important for those who are designing programs and curricula for this age group to understand the group's developmental needs.

The physical development that happens during early adolescence is unmistakable. Youth enter puberty and their bodies grow and change in ways that make them look more adult-like. Puberty happens mainly during the middle school years for most youth, so this time is especially tumultuous physically. Intellectually, during early adolescence youth are still learning to understand the world as more complex than simple dichotomies. They may perceive their experiences in concrete terms, right or wrong, good or bad. They have not yet learned to consider the long-term consequences of their or others' actions. As a result, emotionally, early adolescence can be a harrowing time. Youth are simultaneously looking to assert their independence, but also feel conflicted about leaving behind the safety and security of their family connections. Relatedly, adolescents' social development becomes a primary focus during these years. As they begin to move away from family and assert their independence, they become aware of their need for social interaction and crave friendships and relationships with others – youth and adults – in new ways.

Educational psychologists have noted that the transition from elementary to middle school is an especially important and potentially vulnerable time for youth.²⁰ After spending six years in elementary school, students arrive at middle school where they must learn to manage multiple teachers and classes as well as many other new expectations (lockers and locker rooms, school athletics, homework, and others). These are years when youth are forming their identities. And yet during this critical time, research shows that for many students, their self-esteem suffers and their academic achievement declines. It is an especially pivotal time for girls, as their motivation and success in math and science are greatly impacted during the transition from elementary to middle school.

The institutions that serve youth during this critical time period can take steps to help smooth the transition process for youth and create opportunities for positive youth development both in and out of school. In 2002, the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine published

a report that synthesized best practices that community programs use to support positive youth development.²¹ Although these practices were strained from community-based programs, they are highly relevant to school-based environments – particularly for the relatively unstructured break times during the school day. The report documents the features of youth-serving settings that map onto the developmental needs of youth and highlights what are considered best practices in the field of positive youth development.

Table 1. Features of Settings that Promote Positive Youth Development

Developmental Need	Description
Physical and psychological safety	Safe facilities; practices that increase safe peer group interaction and decrease unsafe peer interactions
Appropriate structure	Limit setting; clear and consistent expectations; firm-enough control; continuity and predictability; clear boundaries; age-appropriate monitoring
Supportive relationships	Warmth; closeness; connectedness; good communication; caring; support; guidance; secure attachment; responsiveness
Opportunities to Belong	Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one’s gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities; social inclusion; social engagement and integration; opportunities for socio-cultural identity formation; and support for cultural and bicultural competence.
Positive social norms	Rules of behavior; expectations; values and morals; obligations for service
Support for efficacy and mattering	Youth-based; empowerment practices that support autonomy; making a real difference in one’s community; being taken seriously
Opportunities for skill building	Opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional and social skills; exposure to intentional learning experiences; opportunities to develop social and cultural capital
Integration of family, school and community efforts	Concordance; coordination; and synergy among family, school and community

Source: The National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine report: *Community Programs to Support Youth Development*.²¹

As is evident in Table 1, middle school break time is an opportunity to promote students’ development in multiple ways. We align practices observed at our study sites with this framework in the Discussion section of this report.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study is centered on student experiences in three Santa Cruz County middle schools serving students in the City of Santa Cruz and Live Oak. Data collections for the study include:

- Observations of middle school brunch and lunch on two consecutive days: Teams of undergraduate student researchers observed four break periods per school, took field notes, and transferred those notes to a common form.
- In-person interviews with middle school staff: The study principal investigator conducted 20-40 minute interviews with administrators, counseling staff, campus supervisors, and others who monitor break time. A total of 14 middle school interviews were completed. All interviews were audiotaped.
- Student surveys: Two of the three middle schools made available by google forms an anonymous three-question open ended survey for students to complete. Questions asked students what they liked, found challenging, and would like to change about their break times.
- In-person interviews with elementary principals: The study principal investigator conducted 30 minute interviews with four elementary principals to understand the recess environments of sending elementary schools. Interviewees were not all current elementary principals, but had been principals at the school when middle school students were there.

Although not included in the analysis here, data collection also included one day of recess observations at each of four Santa Cruz City Schools elementary schools. This data collection was meant to show appreciation to the schools and the school district for partnering on this work. The study team collected and summarized field notes, and also reported findings on a validated rubric, the Great Recess Framework. Findings from these observations were reported to each of the four participating principals. I shared and explained the rubric for their future use. The rubric was also employed for middle school break observations, but proved to be less valuable at that age group.

All observational data were cleaned and compiled across study team members and coded for common themes. Interview data were transcribed and coded for themes pertaining to student experience, adult interactions, and institutional contexts that support productive break time. Student surveys were coded for response themes.

As is shown in Table 2, the three schools differ on several dimensions. Shoreline Middle School, in Live Oak School District, serves the largest proportion of students who are eligible for Free and Reduced Price Meals (a measure of income status), and the highest proportion of students

who are Latinx and English learners. Branciforte Middle School in Santa Cruz City Schools serves about the same proportion of English learners, slightly less than half of its students are Latinx and about half are eligible for Free and Reduced Price Meals. Mission Hill Middle School in Santa Cruz City Schools is the largest school and serves the most advantaged population, with the lowest proportion students who are eligible for Free and Reduced Price Meals and English learner students. The percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards in English language arts and math is also shown in the table. Shoreline students are the least likely to meet these standards and Mission Hill students are the most likely.

Although Mission Hill has the largest student population, it also has the smallest available acreage of outdoor space for students at break time.

Table 2: Student and School Characteristics, 2016-17 School Year

	Branciforte	Mission Hill	Shoreline
Number of Students	509	592	543
Break Time Space Available (estimated)	5.3 acres	3.1 acres	5.3 acres
Ethnicity			
Latinx	48.0%	31.8%	65.5%
White	43.1%	56.1%	25.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.2%	5.8%	7.7%
African American	1.0%	1.3%	3.6%
Two or More/Other	3.7%	4.9%	2.0%
Receiving Free/Reduced Price Meals	50.4%	34.0%	57.7%
English Learner	20.7%	10.3%	21.7%
Met or Exceeded Standards in English Language Arts	54.8%	62.8%	44.4%
Met or Exceeded Standards in Math	37.5%	54.3%	22.9%

Sources: For all statistics except acreage, California Department of Education Dataquest. Acreage estimates calculated using Google Earth.

Findings

What Break Time Looks Like in Middle School

Each of the three middle schools offers two breaks per day. Morning brunch ranges from 10 to 20 minutes and takes place between 10:00 and 10:45AM. Lunch break ranges from 30 to 40 minutes and takes place between 11:35AM and 1:00PM, depending on the school. At each school, all students are on break at the same time. On short days, the bell schedule shifts, but all students have a break on short days as well.

Available options for brunch and lunch varied by school, as shown in Table 3. All three schools prohibit cell phone use during lunch and brunch, and during the entire school day. Each school has a grass or turf field, blacktop for basketball and other games, like four-square, and at least some seating for students on benches and tables. Two schools have a track and one school has exercise equipment located around its track. Schools offer alternative spaces for students to access during brunch and lunch, including the gym (one school), the library (three schools), the computer lab (1 school), teacher rooms (2 schools), and other places. One of the three schools offers a lunch bunch for students who have a difficult time navigating their break time and need extra support in an adult-guided setting.

Table 3: Facilities and Activities Available at the Three Middle Schools

Facilities and Activities	Number of Schools Offering (of 3)
Cell phones prohibited	3
Grass/turf field	3
Four-square courts	2
Basketball courts	3
Track	2
Exercise equipment	1
Multiple seating areas	2
Alternative spaces for break times	
Library	3
Computer lab	1
Gym	1
Lunch bunch	1
Teacher rooms/Clubs	2
Other	1

We observed two days of brunch and lunch at the three middle schools. Brunch, which is shorter, was a less physically active time for students and a more social time. Across the three schools we noted that a minority of students played basketball, football, soccer, and different

versions of four-square, and where these games were played, they were dominated by boys. For example, at one school, the brunch activities consisted mainly of eating and socializing, but where games like basketball and soccer were played, they were played by boys. In this school, there were also students in the music room playing instruments during their brunch break. At another school, there was a large game of football being played, approximately 20 boys, that went on for the entire period with a shared understanding of rules and without conflict. One or two students acted as leaders, helping to form teams and initiate the game. Other students ate and socialized or played in smaller groups. In the third school, the line for food was quite long and impeded movement in the space. But once students had their food they dispersed into different areas of the yard. At this school there was one girl-dominated basketball game alongside the boys' game, as well as many students who sat and socialized in small groups. Students also played soccer and walked.

Lunch at all three schools was longer and therefore students had more time for engagement in different activities. Alternative space for clubs and lunch bunch were only made available at the lunch break. At one school, there were many different opportunities for engagement in sports, including an intramural league that took place in the gym or on the field and was run by the PE teacher. This intramural league was the one place that girls were routinely physically active and engaged in play. At this same school, the library was open with games and activities during lunch and the students had free run of the outdoor space on the campus, with some restrictions as to where they could eat. There were a small number of clubs and a lunch bunch at this school as well. Students were engaged in all these activities, but the majority of students during our observations were talking and socializing in various spaces on campus.

At a second school, students must first eat for 10 minutes and then they were excused to go onto the field. There was a ball shed available for equipment and there were over 20 different student-initiated clubs that met weekly in various teachers' rooms. These clubs seemed to be very popular among the students who were not as interested in football and basketball, the two main sports that were played during lunch on the days we observed. The basketball game was dominated by eighth grade boys, although a second game adjacent to the bigger game had younger boys in it. Four-square re-emerged as an activity in this school, but there was just one court and it was located in a place that was hard for supervisors to monitor. The Teen Center came in once or twice a week to lead games, and although we do not observe this, we were told that these games are popular with younger boys. Many students walked and talked during lunch at this school.

At the third school, students were allowed access to most of the campus and teachers' rooms, if the teachers allowed it. Two days a week the Teen Center came in to lead games, or some type of activity that is unique from what is usually happening at lunch. There were several student clubs, but not as many as at the second school and not as many students engage in them. The

game club was very popular as it is the one time during the week when students are allowed to use their phones during lunch. Sports such as basketball and soccer are popular with the boys at this school.

Adults' Break Time Goals and Activities

Physical activity is important, actually, for learning as well as just for physical health, so [break time] allows kids to move around, or not. Some of them just sit and talk, but to take a break from sitting in a chair, often a semi-passive role...and to use their brain in a different way, and use their body, allows them to reset.

--Middle School Administrator

Adults who are responsible for planning and supervising brunch and lunch at the three middle schools share a common understanding of the importance for students to take a break during the school day. Not all middle schools nationwide offer students break time for socializing and play, although research demonstrates the merit of these breaks for promoting their physical and social-emotional health. However, left

unsupervised, break time can also be an opportunity for unhealthy activities, including bullying, exclusion, and conflict. It's also a time for students to receive more subtle messages about inclusion and belonging from their peers and the adults who plan and supervise their break time. Adults feel that monitoring these aspects of brunch and lunch is among their most important roles as break time supervisors.

This supervisory role is so important that all three middle schools have full-time school employees monitoring break time. At each school, the principal, assistant principal, counseling staff and campus supervisor are the break time monitors. In some cases, teachers also participate, usually voluntarily. This staffing structure was seen as important for supporting the students in multiple ways, including using the time to get to know students so that adults can really connect with the adolescents in their care and also to learn about potential problems that are escalating but not yet visible.

Ensuring Students' Physical Safety

Adults see one of their primary roles at brunch and lunch as ensuring student safety, and a key way they do this is by focusing on their physical safety. At all three schools, respondents described similar problems with regard to student physical contact. They reported that students, mainly boys, goof around together and then what was originally fun escalates quickly. This is particularly a

Sixth graders in particular have a lot more touching-type behavior because they are just young, immature, and they want to kind of wrestle, and that can escalate...One kid thinks we're still having fun. The other kid is truly injured and offended and has his feelings hurt.

--Middle School Administrator

We talk to about how even playful pushes can escalate into actual physical fights...because at this point they have a lot of skin hunger, they're craving that touch, but it's not appropriate at school when I have [more than] 500 kids to keep safe to have them bouncing off each other.

--Middle School Administrator

problem, according to multiple respondents, among sixth grade boys, who are more used to the physical contact with each other. A commonly described incident is that boys are in each other's space through game-like pushing or jumping on each other's backs. One boy gets hurt and the other(s) do not realize it and suddenly the incident has escalated to a physical altercation. But, as soon as their tempers cool, they are best friends

again. The goal of supervisors is to teach students to stay out of each other's physical space so that these incidents can be prevented. These incidents can happen during games, like soccer and football, but also when students are not playing an official game. Respondents report that this is among the most important of their roles as supervisors.

Monitors, especially campus supervisors, report that their other strategy for ensuring physical safety is to get to know the students through interacting with them at break time and throughout the school day. They can use subtle clues, like when a student who normally sits with one group moves to another, or a group of students who usually walk home in one direction head in the other, to identify when some kind of trouble is brewing. Because break time is a key period for building relationships and observing behavior in an unrestricted setting, it offers campus supervisors the opportunity to to prevent physical altercations that might occur later in the day.

Supporting Students' Emotional Safety

Focusing on students' emotional safety is a second priority area for adult break time supervisors. According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, emotional safety refers to, "an experience in which one feels safe to express emotions, security, and confidence to take risks and feel challenged and excited to try something new."²²

There's a whole social system that's a difficult one. But middle school's this time where they're testing their boundaries in many ways...one of the ways is actually being exclusionary toward each other and kind of seeing how far they can push a friendship.

--Middle School Administrator

Supporting emotional safety for more than 500 students with different needs at the same time is a challenge, and supervisors have different strategies for different groups.

For those with the most emotional needs, one school offered a "lunch bunch" in which select students are invited to join an adult – a counselor – in a quieter space for lunch. They can bring friends and it's an opportunity to practice social skills in a safe environment with an adult to guide the interactions. Respondents share that the lunch bunch group is usually pretty small and

they hand pick the students to include. When they see their numbers dwindling, as often happens during the school year, they feel they have done their job in supporting the neediest students to manage brunch and lunch independently.

Even for students who do not need intensive social and emotional support, schools offer ways to create smaller environments for students who can feel overwhelmed by the crowds present at brunch and lunch – often the sixth graders. One way they do this is by having an outside organization lead games at the school one or two days a week. The Teen Center approached two of the three schools and offered to have a staff member lead games at the school during lunch time. Administrators at both these two schools knew little about the focus of the Teen Center’s activities, but welcomed them to campus. We did not observe any of the Teen Center activities, but learned from respondents that they set up games that were popular with younger boys who wanted to be physically active and play during lunch, but had a hard time joining or starting a game in a space dominated by older students. This more organized or structured environment with an adult game leader was popular for these students, and supervisors reported that up to 20 or 30 students at a time would play the Teen Center games.

Some kids can self-regulate and be fine just to go talk with their friends for 20-25 minutes and take care of business...But there are a lot of kids who can't, and would love to have something to do besides that...So it would be nice if there were more opportunities for kids to get the things they need whether it's physical or creative or emotional.

--Middle School Staff

As was shown in Table 3, all schools reported having some alternative spaces where students could go during their brunch and lunch if the mayhem of the outside yard was too overwhelming for them. These alternative spaces include games in the library, student-organized and teacher-supported clubs, teacher rooms (including art and music), computer labs, and on one campus an adjacent non-profit organization’s

supervised space. These alternatives are important for the students who use them, but by all accounts do not offer enough options for students who want something else to do during brunch and lunch. Respondents reported to us that they wished they could have more activities and creative activities for girls, especially, but that funding and staff availability limited their ability to do this. They thought that jewelry making or some other crafts would attract girls and give them a positive environment for interaction that removed some of the social pressures they face without structured or organized activities in which to engage. One staff member offered the example that on a rainy day, the Teen Center organized friendship bracelet making inside. It was apparently very popular with both girls and boys, and staff wished there were more opportunities for activities like that. The two schools without intramurals also hoped to be able to implement these in the future, and one was taking steps toward that goal as our study observations concluded.

To support student emotional safety, staff report that they engage with students one-on-one and in groups to help them feel comfortable and like they belong at school. We heard examples of counselors and campus supervisors seeing students in distress and offering in-the-moment support as well as follow-up support after break time. However, emotional distress is not always visible and staff recognize that having spaces for all students to feel comfortable during brunch and lunch is essential. A good example of the subtle ways that students feel exclusion is, as one respondent told us, about the hierarchy of seating outside. At the start of the school year, the sixth graders inevitably sat at a bench that was traditionally the eighth grade bench. And even if the eighth grade students weren't intending to be exclusive or rejecting, by claiming their space and not sharing it with younger students, they made the sixth graders feel that the school climate is unfriendly to them. How to salvage this for sixth graders so they also have a place during a critical developmental time – the transition to middle school – is a challenge.

The role [of break supervisor] is to make people safe. Or feel comfortable – out there because there's a lot of kids that don't like to be out there, it doesn't feel that they can be out there, so I think my role is to make sure that they're comfortable enough to get out there and to interact with other kids.

--Middle School Staff

Student Engagement During Break Time

The vast majority of students spend time outside during their breaks and engage in three primary activities: eating, socializing and playing games or sports. From a developmental perspective, respondents agree that all of these activities are appropriate and supporting students to do them respectfully is a key goal.

Food and Eating During Break Time

I would, in a perfect world, have the lunch line be shorter because a lot of kids are on free and reduced. And so they have to wait in line and it's super long and so that's most of their break so they don't get to play.

--Middle School Staff

Eating is a key component of students' reset time during both brunch and lunch. As a period of intense physical development, adolescence requires opportunities to refuel. Yet, eating is sometimes the most challenging part of break time for several reasons. First, students and staff both report that the lines

for food are long and that students can spend most of their break time waiting for food and then eating it. Students highlight this challenge in their survey responses, discussed in the next section. As the staff member with the highlighted quote notes, this can be an equity issue because it disproportionately affects students who are receiving Free and Reduced Price Meals. Students

who bring their meals from home can eat as soon as break begins and still have time to engage in other activities. One school helped to ameliorate this problem by allowing sixth grade students to be released five minutes prior to other students, which allowed them to get their food first and still have time to play, but also shortened the wait time for older students as well.

Some students do not eat at their break time because they are too eager to play or because their time is so limited that they would need to choose food or play. This problem was identified for students playing intramurals at the one school that offered these. Students perceived that those who wanted to engage in intramurals had to forgo lunch in order to be at their game during the time period. At a school without intramurals, school administrators instated a short eating time at the start of lunch during which students had to be on the black top and at tables and benches, and not eating food or playing on the field. The campus supervisor releases students after their eating time is complete. This practice is very similar to what happens at many elementary schools, where students are required to eat and then play or the converse, but with specified time periods for each. However, elementary schools usually have enough seating for all students to sit and eat, whereas the middle schools we visited do not.

This eating time was also meant as a way of curtailing the amount of food and wrappers that are carried onto the field and end up as litter. Addressing litter was a key issue for all three schools and each had areas where food was not allowed. At one school students who were caught littering by the custodian had to pick up waste with garbage bags the following day. Food fights and excess trash were identified as major challenges that recess supervisors face routinely.

Physical Activity and Play

Our own observations, corroborated with what we heard from administrators and staff in interviews, indicate that much of the physical activity and play happening at break time is occurring among boys. Brunch and lunch are key opportunities for both boys and girls to accrue time toward the suggested 60 minutes per day of physical activity. And both boys and girls can benefit from the health and academic benefits of physical activity breaks. Yet, girls are not drawn to physical activities at break time in the same numbers as boys. We asked respondents to help us understand this issue and heard a variety of responses.

The same girls who are after school athletes...will sit on a bench or, right now, a lot of them are just walking and talking...It's the stereotype. The girls want to talk and the boys want to play basketball. They want to be active.

--Middle School Administrator

The most common explanation for why girls are not as physically active at break time was that it was girls' preference to socialize. Break time supervisors felt that because socialization is a developmentally appropriate activity, and also because students had physical education class for

exercise, this choice of activity at break time is a good use of students' time. Still, it was striking that at all three schools, very few girls were engaged in physically active games.

[A group of] seventh grade girls has been playing four-square and they are the ones who started the four-square game. But now this group of boys came over and they've taken over the game. Which is fine, like it's great for the kids to play together, but...what [the girls] want is a game they can control and play and maybe the boys can figure out how to play next to them...The way they interact is that the boys just took over and the girls kind of acquiesce.

--Middle School Staff

When we delved a bit deeper, we learned of several potential barriers to girls' play. The first is, as the quote to the left indicates, the play space is dominated by adolescent boys, and typically older ones. Girls may be reluctant to join in boys' games, even if they like the sport, because of the different ways that boys and girls play. However, in this instance where girls attempted to start their own game, it was still taken over by the boys. The solution for this particular problem is that the school is painting more four-square courts this summer to accommodate multiple games.

Another challenge to girls playing at break time was described by a staff member as structural and related to gender segregation in extramural sports teams. Boys and girls play on separate teams for all sports at this age, and especially for the most involved athletes, they are unused to gender integrated teams. Even in a school setting, they appear to not want to play sports together.

Another barrier to girls' play at break time is that they are not wearing clothing that is conducive to active play. Whereas boys may be wearing looser fitting clothes and shoes they can run in, girls may be wearing tighter fitting clothes or shoes that are harder to run in. In our observations, we noted that the boys who play hard at brunch and lunch come back to class sweaty and out of breath. Respondents told us that the girls do not want to be sweaty after their break. There are games that do not require as much running as soccer and basketball, like four-square, that girls like to play. But we did not see very many examples of these in the observations we conducted.

We did see and also hear about girls using their break time to "walk and talk" either around a track or the basketball courts. No school had an official walk and talk game, but respondents were interested in the idea of creating incentives for walking and talking through different mechanisms so that students who do not like to play active games can also get some exercise.

Socialization and Other Activities

Socialization is a key aspect of middle school break time and adults recognize that this social time is important developmentally for adolescents. However, they also recognize that not all students are as adept at navigating this complex social environment and so have made available other kinds of opportunities for students.

[Girls] for the most part are drawn by whatever their connection is. So they want to be with their friends. So if their friends want to sit and eat, then they're gonna sit and eat with their friends...Kids want to blow off steam...And they want time to talk and interact and sort of do the gossip and the things that teenagers do when they talk.

--Middle School Administrator

As is shown in Table 3, schools have clubs, intramurals, games in the library, and other alternative spaces that students can go and be in smaller group settings. Still, adults feel this is not enough for all students. One administrator felt that helping students to learn to navigate different social groups was an important part of break time, and to do that, there needed to be multiple types of activities from which students could pick. But respondents from each school

It's important to be able to navigate different social groups...and it's not easily done. But if you were to play volleyball at lunchtime, and you have other friends that you play soccer with after school, that might be two groups. And if there's drama in one group, you could float to that volleyball group from lunch. Or if your best friend is absent, you might be able to join a game and have someone to hang out with.

--Middle School Administrator

admit that there are not enough resources to set up break time the way they would like. At the two schools without intramurals, respondents indicated that having these activities to engage both boys and girls would be greatly beneficial, but finding a staff member to run intramurals is a challenge. At the third school, funds from the district pay for the PE teacher to run intramurals for students.

Respondents also indicated that activities such as arts and crafts that are set up by and overseen by adults would be popular with students, but again they do not have the resources for materials or the staff to organize these. Some respondents mentioned having had parents step in to volunteer and spearhead these efforts, but it is hard to sustain a program by relying solely on volunteers.

Students' Perceptions of Break Time

Administrators from two schools expressed interest in surveying their students about brunch and lunch and each of these two schools conducted an online student survey. In total, 456 students responded to the following three open-ended survey questions:

1. In addition to eating, what do you most like to do during brunch and lunch?
2. What aspects of brunch and lunch do you find most challenging?

3. What else would you like to do that is not currently available at your school?

The surveys were open to students from 4/26/2018 through 6/6/2018 and were available for students of all middle school grade levels to answer. To maintain student confidentiality, schools did not ask for any demographic information, including grade level or gender.

Question 1: What do you like to do during brunch and lunch?

- Play sports or games
- Move around
- Socialize with friends
- Visit spaces other than the yard
- Participate in clubs or adult-organized activities.

The first question asked what students' preferred activities were during brunch and lunch and responses mirrored both what we heard in our conversations with adults and our own observations from brunch and lunch at all three middle schools. An important break time activity for students is playing games and sports. Among the most popular responses were frisbee, four-square, soccer, volleyball, pickleball, imaginative games, and simply, "hangout with my friends and play games."

Aligned with this, students were eager to get out of their seats and move around during their breaks and they talked about this in their responses as "not sitting for 50 minutes" and "walking the track with friends." Hanging out and talking in general and socializing with friends was another popular theme, aligned closely with students' developmental needs. Students reported they enjoyed "Being able to have a break and be with my friends" or "talking with friends" during their breaks.

Importantly, many students reported visiting what we called *alternative spaces* in their responses. We classified alternative spaces as anywhere outside the play yard that students were allowed to spend time. The computer lab, teacher's classrooms, and the library were all mentioned as popular places to visit during break time. One student replied, "I like going to the room with all the board games because I can play cards in there."

Finally, students reported they liked to engage in specific clubs or adult organized activities on campus. Students mentioned movie club, maker Mondays, and lunch bunch as being their favored activities at break.

The second question asked what students felt was challenging about their brunch and lunch time. Students responded overwhelmingly that there was an issue with time, both waiting in the food lines for too long and not having enough time to eat and engage in other activities. One student mentioned, "Brunch is too short. I wait in line every day, and normally the bell rings right as I get my food." In relation to having time for eating and other activities, a student wrote that the main challenge was, "The fact that we have only eight minutes to eat" and another said "Not

eating because I play volleyball.” These responses are illustrative of this commonly mentioned theme.

Students also mentioned feeling excluded as a challenge during brunch and lunch. In their responses, they talked about rejection, getting away from drama, being excluded, and people talking behind other people’s backs as examples of exclusion that they experienced in their breaks. There were also many concerns about seating. Students not being able to find their friends as a result of the lunch area being too crowded, no inside seating option, and not having enough shade were all problems the students reported experiencing. Students also mentioned boredom during break time, or not having anything to do. “It’s a little boring” or “finding something to do” were noted as challenges for students.

Question 2: What do you find most challenging about brunch and lunch?

- Time to both eat and do other things
- Exclusion
- Seating
- Boredom
- Lack of access to phones

There was also a theme regarding transitions to and from class that were present among the student responses. Students bumping into each other, not having time to access lockers without being late to class and carrying heavy backpacks around during lunch were all common concerns by the students.

Question 3: What would you like to do that is not currently available?

- Playground equipment
- Other equipment
- Open alternative spaces
- Longer breaks
- More activities—including games and clubs
- Student voice in decisions

Third, we asked students what they would like from their break time that is not currently available at their schools. Surprising to our research team, many students responded that they wanted access to playground equipment, meaning play structures such as the ones they were accustomed to in elementary school. One student wrote in all caps “I WANT A PLAYGROUND.” Other students mentioned specifically wanting somewhere to climb and swing. Although we did not ask students any personal information, we surmise that those who were interested in playground equipment were younger

students looking for something easier to engage in at break than joining a game with older students. Students also requested sports equipment in general, including more balls of different kinds and more courts painted on the blacktop for four-square.

Students also responded that they wanted greater access to alternative spaces on campus. In one school, students requested that the library be open. Another student asked for “some kind of club during lunch or a place that’s quiet to read or draw.” Students also had many requests for more

organized or adult-led activities on campus during break. A student in a school that does not have intramurals said, “It would be cool if we could play a game in the gym.” Other students responded “more activities” and “games during lunch and brunch.” One student had a specific request for a “chess club or parent or teacher organized games like capture the flag/kickball at lunch time.” As phones were not allowed at any of the middle schools we visited, some students reported wanting to be able to use their phone during break.

In the same vein as their response about the lack of time for eating and other activities in question 1, students requested more time for brunch and lunch. In one school, they especially wanted more time to be able to play on the field and in both schools, students mentioned wanting to speed the lunch line. Although we did not specifically ask about the food served, students voiced a desire to be involved in making choices about what food is being served during break time and made specific requests for healthier food or more vegetarian options.

Discussion

Break time is an important aspect of the middle school day to support positive youth development for students in each of the four developmental areas: physical, intellectual, social and emotional. This research project uncovered numerous ways that the three middle schools in Santa Cruz City Schools and Live Oak School District are supporting positive development for their students at break time and at the same time noted the many challenges faced by adults and students in creating break times that meet everyone's needs.

Administrators, counselors and campus supervisors who monitor brunch and lunch are all well versed in youth development and understand intuitively what students need from their breaks. They have put systems in place to support play and physical activity for students who gravitate toward those activities and provide the space for socialization for others who are not as interested. The three schools have different versions of "alternative spaces" for students who want a smaller setting that is away from the chaos of the larger group, but respondents from each school acknowledge that they could do more. Campus supervisors, especially, were tuned in to the different student groups and were aware of their role as an emotional support and peacekeeper for students, and how to best achieve this. Schools all had programs to support positive behavior, core values, or social-emotional development that were put in place during the past few school years. Administrators understood well how these programs can dovetail with break time to support positive development.

We asked administrators and others how they felt student behavior had changed in the years since Playworks was adopted at the elementary schools, and all felt that they had seen improvements in their break times. But, none felt they could point directly to Playworks as the reason, which is appropriate. In an era of great educational reform, where the California Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control Accountability Plan was adopted, alongside the Common Core State Standards, Positive Behavior Intervention Systems, Second Step, and other reforms, it would be impossible to detect if any one change resulted in improved break time behavior for students. But, it is reassuring to hear that the most problematic behaviors that require intervention at brunch and lunch are less present than in the past.

I would say over the course of doing this these [past] four years...what I've noticed is there's a lot less stuff happening that's problematic. And I don't know if it's [school program]...I wish I knew what the something was, but my guess is that it's a myriad of things and we can't isolate a particular variable. But it's definitely just a lot smoother than it's been before.

--Middle School Administrator

Still, there are challenges and barriers faced across the three schools that, if addressed, would support an improved brunch and lunch experience for some students. The key issues that were identified by adults and students at the schools are the following.

- **Access to more and different types of activities.** Although some students have their needs met through playing sports or socializing, many others do not. Particularly for entering sixth graders and girls of all ages, having alternative spaces and different types of activities, particularly those led or supported by adults, can make students feel safe and help them to engage. Over time, adult presence may be less needed. Activities such as board games, quiet spaces, arts and crafts, and music all surfaced as ones that students would participate in.
- **Availability of physical activity and sports for girls.** At all three schools, girls were the least likely to be engaged in physical activity and sports, although many girls are athletes who play school and club sports. Attention to girls' interests in sports and creating opportunities for girls specifically. Ideas include creating space for games that girls like to play (e.g., four-square) and having a "walk and talk" activity, where incentives encourage students to walk laps or where recess monitors take turns monitoring this station by walking and talking with students.
- **Attention to the needs of younger students.** Our findings correspond with the little research available on middle school break time that the oldest boys in the school tend to exert the greatest control over the tenor and activities at break time. Younger or less athletic students who want to play games like football, basketball, and soccer may not be able to join those games unless an adult helps to integrate them (as we saw with the Teen Center). Younger students, especially sixth graders, as they transition to middle school are in a vulnerable position, and creating a welcoming environment for them is important to their adjustment. Students who believe they belong and are welcome at school experience stronger academic outcomes.
- **Reducing wait times at food lines.** Students and adults acknowledge the challenge of needing to wait in line for food during an oftentimes short break. Exploring options for reducing wait times is one way to improve equity in access to physical activity and other pro-social activities at break time and ensuring students actually eat during the breaks that they have.
- **Additional resources to support break time.** All respondents lamented that a lack of resources – funds, in-kind, and personnel – limited their abilities to address shortcomings in their break time. Recess is often the forgotten period of the day because it is not a place that academic learning occurs. And yet, what happens at break time, as all the administrators we spoke to know, sets up students for success and failure in the other aspects of their school day. Specifically funds for intramural leagues, art and other

supplies, adults to organize activities, and equipment would add tremendously to what is currently available.

- **Student empowerment during break time.** Creating leadership opportunities for youth is an excellent way to boost their development and ensure that adults are responsive to student needs. Forming a break time or school climate commission, creating opportunities for meaningful engagement and change, and giving students ownership over their break time experiences are important ways to empower students. The survey results from students at two schools indicate that students want a say in their break time.

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