Recess Before Lunch in Elementary Schools: Development of a Best Practice Checklist

National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi
1-800-321-3054

2009
This publication has been produced by the National Food Service Management Institute - Applied Research Division, located at The University of Southern Mississippi with headquarters at The University of Mississippi. Funding for the Institute has been provided with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, to The University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of The University of Mississippi or the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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PURPOSE
The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Technology Transfer and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

MISSION
The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

VISION
The vision of the NFSMI is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in Child Nutrition Programs.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rise in childhood obesity has prompted many school nutrition (SN) professionals and school administrators to explore innovative ways of creating a healthful wellness environment while utilizing existing school resources. Many believe recess before lunch (RBL) is one approach to influence a healthful wellness environment. The RBL approach provides students with an opportunity for physical activity prior to lunch and then the opportunity to consume a nutritionally balanced lunch in a safe and secure environment. SN professionals understand the impact of students’ nutritional intake, physical activity, cognitive development, and behavior on their well-being. SN professionals also play an active role in RBL by implementing and assessing successful practices that relate to the nutrition services provided.

In 2007, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), a federally assisted meal program, served nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 30.5 million children daily (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2008). However, serving children a school lunch is only the first step. If children are to realize the full benefits of the NSLP meal, they must choose to eat the food served. Studies have shown that students often do not finish their school lunch for a multitude of reasons, including recess placement within the school day. The School Health Policies and Programs Study 2006 found that 96.8% of elementary schools provided recess during the school day for at least one grade. However, only 10.4% of elementary schools
provided recess immediately before lunch for students in all grades (Lee, Burgeson, Fulton, & Spain, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to determine the best practices (quality indicators) related to recess placement before lunch in elementary schools, to compile a best practice checklist that can be used as an assessment tool for SN programs, and to validate and evaluate the usefulness of the best practice checklist. This study is based upon previous research that explored recess placement and will provide a valuable resource for school professionals implementing and maintaining RBL programs in elementary schools.

This study was conducted in two phases. In Phase I, researchers drafted 107 best practice statements from previous research, research literature, and standards of practice for the NSLP. These statements were evaluated in a two-day workgroup meeting with an expert panel of SN directors, principals, and state agency personnel representing five USDA regions. Expert panel members provided input and confirmed the practice categories and the best practice statements, and then categorized the statements with supporting goals and standard supporting practice statements. Three of the five research-based practice categories identified in previous research (“Personnel Support and Workload”, “Logistics”, and “Scheduling”) were confirmed by the work group, as well as the three goals, 18 best practice statements, and 18 considerations and professional reminder practice statements. A summary of the agreed upon practice categories, supporting goals, best practice statements, and standard supporting practice statements was e-mailed to expert panel members to confirm placement of goals and practice statements, and to provide additional comments and suggestions on formatting the best practice checklist. Comments and suggestions from expert panel members were used to draft the best practice checklist for evaluation in Phase II of the study.
In Phase II, the draft checklist was further evaluated and pilot tested via e-mail by a national review panel of SN directors and state agency personnel from six USDA regions. Based on the review panel’s comments and suggestions, the best practice checklist was revised and formatted as a Web-based, self-assessment tool. The *NFSMI Best Practice Checklist for School Nutrition Professionals Implementing or Assessing Recess Before Lunch in Elementary Schools* resource has a user-friendly format designed around three practice categories, four goals, and 39 best practices and standard supporting practices that contribute to the achievement of four prevailing goals listed under the three research-based practice categories. The checklist could be used as a self-assessment tool for school professionals who wish to implement or assess RBL in elementary schools.