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## Recess Policy in Chicago Public Schools: 1855-2006

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

RECESS POLICY IN  
CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS:  
1855-2006

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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BY  
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## ABSTRACT

The history of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) recess policy has been marked by long periods of consistency. However, in the last two decades the history of recess policy has changed significantly. Beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Board of Education required one to two recess sessions per day in primary or elementary schools. This is in stark contrast to the 1991 policy which eliminated recess entirely for seven years. In 1998 there was another policy shift which is still in effect today. This policy allows individual principals and their local school councils to determine how to allocate their daily schedule. Therefore, each school has the opportunity to choose whether or not to schedule recess into their already full day. Currently, only one-third of CPS schools allow time for recess. Unfortunately, many students are missing out on having recess as a part of their day. This work will seek to illuminate the history of CPS's recess policy as well as find the reasons behind the drastic policy shifts.

## Statement of the Problem

Educators Anthony Pelligrini and Peter Smith defined recess as “a break period in which child directed play takes place, typically outdoors” (Pelligrini & Smith, 2003, p. 51). Their definition illustrates the drastic difference between physical education class, in which teacher facilitated play takes place, and recess. It should be noted that each is an isolated period and that one cannot replace another. This paper will only focus on recess which allows for child directed play as defined by Pelligrini and Smith.

According to the National Association for Sports and Physical Education, “all elementary school children should be provided with at least one daily period of recess of at least 20 minutes in length” (National Association for Sports and Physical Education, 2006). Despite this recommendation, policymakers in Chicago have failed to reinstate the previously mandated recess policy.

Many factors justify the need for a historical analysis of CPS' recess policy. First, recess provides opportunities to improve children's physical development as well as their overall health and wellness. Recess provides opportunities for children to run, jump, climb, swing and participate in organized sports. Physical play and movement are essential to children's growth and healthy development. However, in more recent years, children's physical play is

even more imperative as obesity rates among Chicago children have skyrocketed, resulting in an influx of childhood disease including childhood diabetes. Recess can provide physical play opportunities to combat these challenges.

Second, recess allows children time to take a break from their classroom environment and formal lessons. During this time children can run off excess energy, socialize with classmates, and discover their own special talents and abilities. After recess, children can return to their studies refreshed and ready to focus on their lessons, which is mutually beneficial to their teacher and fellow classmates. It is important to remember that children were not built to sit still all day, especially when most children within CPS only receive a twenty minute lunch break. As a former CPS teacher, I witnessed many occasions when lunch was shortened by five to ten minutes due to delays in the cafeteria or transitioning classes through the lunchroom. CPS's exceedingly short lunch period barely gives children time to inhale their food let alone have time to relax and socialize with friends. CPS children need allocated break time from the classroom, and the already short lunch period does not fill the void of recess.

Finally, recess, similar to other periods throughout the school day, is a learning opportunity, and this opportunity has been wasted during periods of CPS history. During recess children learn how to negotiate and socialize with their peers; unlike in the classroom, they are able to do so on their own terms (Kieff,

2001). Similarly, Dr. David Elkind states that children's participation in self-directed games with rules plays an important role in their social and emotional development (Elkind, 2007). These skills are essential to children learning how to control their impulses and improve their executive function, as well as their social, emotional and cognitive development (Tough, 2009). It is evident that children gain a variety of skills necessary for their development during recess.

Overall, recess has mutual benefits for children, parents, teachers and policymakers. It also provides Chicago children with learning opportunities which are essential to holistic education.

#### Review of Literature

Beginning in the late 1990's, recess was seen as a hot topic in the field of education. Some research during this time focused on the developmental benefits of recess, as well as those which directly affected children's performance in the classroom (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996). Others emphasized in their research the time reduction of recess or, in some school districts, the elimination of recess (Kieff, 2001). Researchers remarked that safety concerns on school playgrounds and school boards' fears of lawsuits played a role in the cancellation of recess (Kieff, 2001; Johnson, 1998). However, other research suggests that the primary reason for this policy shift was due to the intense pressure to raise school's standardized tests scores. Many researchers cite the

Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act for playing a vital role in the trend to reduce or do away with recess (Delisio, 2008; Ohanian, 2002).

With many school districts under extreme pressure to raise their test scores, administrators felt that more time was needed to prepare children for standardized achievement tests. In some school districts test preparation time was found by the reduction or elimination of recess. For example, Benjamin O. Canada, the superintendent of schools in Atlanta, told *The New York Times*, "We are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on monkey bars" (Johnson, 1998). In response to this bold statement, educator Susan Ohanian wrote *What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?* Despite the fact that her work fails to address recess policy, it does illustrate the detrimental consequences of eliminating recess and replacing it with intense test preparation on children's ability to be successful in elementary school (Ohanian, 2002). Some of the consequences she concludes are children's inability to solve problems as well as work collaboratively with classmates.

It should be noted that the majority of literature in this field focuses on the previously mentioned generalized statements regarding the absence of recess. Much of this literature is repetitive and lacks any scholarly research to move the history of recess policy forward. However, there are a few scholarly works which



have led to a better understanding of recess policy shifts throughout the last century at a national, state, and local level.

At the national level, Simone Bostic examined recess' history as well as the contemporary issues affecting its place in schools today. Without concrete data, Bostic concluded that recess dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, she cited education philosophers, such as John Locke and John Dewey, who wrote extensively on children's play (2004). She also recognized trends throughout history that affected the state of recess. One such trend was the Playground Movement, which was a period in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in which playgrounds were being built at schools and settlement houses in hopes of Americanizing immigrants. Another trend which she highlighted was the push towards organized play at recess in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bostic, 2004). Although both of these periods are important to the history of play, neither is specific to the actual history of recess.

In addition, Bostic's historical analysis of recess illustrated that the so-called contemporary issues affecting recess have always been present. She identified these issues to be school violence, sexual harassment, the supervision of recess, standardized testing, and health and quality of life (Bostic, 2004). She remarked that large scale changes needed to be taken to reduce or remove the challenges of contemporary recess (Bostic, 2004). Moreover, Bostic argued that eliminating recess from the school day is not the answer (2004).

Another researcher who has slightly touched on the history of recess is Anthony Pellegrini. In his book, *Recess: Its Role in Education and Development*, Pellegrini dedicated a chapter to the history of recess in the United States and abroad. He concluded that there is no historical record noting the beginning of school recess in America or the motive behind it. Pellegrini remarked that there has not been enough research to understand recess policies at the national and local level and therefore there is a lack of clear answers regarding recess' history in America (Pellegrini, 2005). This illustrates the need for more historical research similar to this study on the history of recess policy throughout the United States.

Despite the unclear nature of the history of recess, Pellegrini pointed out that there are two converging approaches which attempt to understand its history. In the first approach researchers focused on the role of play within the Child Study Movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This approach portrays schools as liberating children (Pellegrini, 2005). This is identical to Bostic's previously mentioned approach to recess history in which she highlighted Locke and Dewey's writings on children's play.

The second approach to recess history which Pellegrini emphasized was the focus on the history of playgrounds, especially those found on school grounds. Pellegrini remarked that researchers who take this approach find schools to be a means to control children (2005). It is evident the use of these

approaches to understand the history of recess are doing a disservice to the field. This is because researchers whom use these approaches have failed to solely unravel the recess' history.

Reviewing Bostic and Pellegrini's work illuminates the grave need for research to understand recess policies in America's schools throughout the last century. Other researchers have taken more detailed looks at how recess policy, or the lack thereof, has affected individual states in the last decade. Sadly, these studies only illustrate a snapshot of the state of recess policies within the last few years; they are not a historical analysis. As Pellegrini noted in his book, more research is needed to understand the history of recess policy at all levels.

An example of a more recent study on recess was conducted by Michael M. Patte, who sought to identify the place of recess in Pennsylvania schools. In his study he worked with teachers and administrators throughout the state to illustrate the various recess policies as well as gathered reactions from the school's staff in regards to the recess policies (Patte, 2009). Patte's research findings showed that the majority of schools in Pennsylvania did not eliminate recess due to the pressure of raising standardized achievement tests (2009). However, many schools did reduce the time of their recess period to account for the need for additional test preparation time (Patte, 2009). The study also found that a majority of teachers and administrators interviewed in the study were against the recess policy shifts taking place in their schools, believing that it

would have negative implications on children's learning (Patte, 2009). Patte's findings illustrated the powerlessness of Pennsylvanian teachers and administrators in the opposition of policymakers on a local and state level who sought to adjust the recess period to meet the pressures accompanied by the standardized achievement tests.

Another study which sought to gain a better understanding of recess policy on the state's level was that of Belansky, Cutforth, Delong, Ross, Scarbro, Gilbert, Beatty, & Marshall. In their study they issued before and after surveys to a random sample of low-income schools impacted by the federally mandated local wellness policy. This policy focused on both nutrition and physical activity in schools. As a result of the Colorado's Local Wellness Policy, the time allotted to physical education classes increased whereas the recess period decreased by nineteen minutes per week (Belansky et al., 2009). They concluded that the Local Wellness Policy was ineffective due to administrators' lack of knowledge about them, as well as the lack of accountability to assist in enforcing the policies and the resources allotted to carry them out (Belansky et al., 2009). This study illustrated the insufficient impact that the Local Wellness Policy had on recess in Colorado schools.

This review of literature illustrates the absence of research on the history of recess policy at the local, state and national level. As a result, this study will

aid in the dire need to uncover the policies at a local level, specifically within CPS the third largest school district in the nation.

#### Research Question

This historical analysis of recess in Chicago will seek to illuminate the history of recess which is currently nonexistent, as highlighted earlier in Pellegrini's work. This will be done by answering the following question: What is the history of recess policy in Chicago Public Schools? In addition, to assist in understanding this history it will also investigate the following question: What were the reasons for shifts in recess policies?

#### Research Methodology

Chicago's recess history was traced through historical document-based research. The main archive used was that of the Chicago Board of Education. Within this archive, policy documents including the Rules and Regulations of CPS and the Official Proceedings of the Board were used to create a timeline of recess beginning in 1855. These documents were also used to highlight policy shifts throughout the last century. However, the Board archives provide no evidence as to why these policy shifts occurred.

Chicago newspaper archives, specifically the Chicago Defender and the Chicago Tribune, assisted in understanding these policy shifts by identifying events which may have played an influential role in recess' history. These

archives were also used to research the city's response to shifts in policy as well as general news about recess happenings.

The final archive used was that of the Chicago History Museum, which contained the Chicago Teacher's Union general records as well as the union news bulletins. These documents were used to draw parallels between policy shifts and the Union. Specifically, the Union documents were used to identify teachers' general opinion about recess.

#### Limitations

Within the research methodology, limitations were found in some of the archives and the collections used. At the Board of Education archives there was an overall absence of records on recess. For example, their collection of the Rules and Regulations of the Board, a yearly published document which mandated among other items its recess policy, spanned from 1855 to 2006. However, scattered throughout this period two-thirds of the policy documents were missing. It should be noted that the largest gap spanned from 1911-1921. Due to the limitations of the available policy documents, the assumption is that no changes were made to recess policy during the missing years.

Another limitation to the rules and regulations collection was the wording within the policy. For example, between 1922 and 1990 it read as follows:

Sec. 6-24. (Regular School Hours) Unless the General Superintendent of Schools otherwise orders, the pupils' morning session of the elementary schools shall commence at 9:00 am and close at noon. Their afternoon session shall commence at 1:00 pm and close at 3:15 pm. A recess of

fifteen minutes each forenoon and ten minutes each afternoon shall be given to the pupils of the elementary schools at the hour near the middle of the session (Board of Education, 1922 & 1990).

It should be noted that for 68 years this recess policy contained a loophole. The policy stated “unless the General Superintendent of Schools otherwise orders” (Board of Education, 1922 & 1990). For this reason, it is unknown whether or not the recess policy was truly enforced during this period at all schools city-wide. It should be noted that very little evidence was found to dispute this policy, but with the absence of records from the office of the general superintendents it is unknown how often former general superintendents used their power to change this policy. With support of Chicago newspaper archives, this idea will be elaborated on in a latter section.

Another major limitation found in the Board’s archive was within the Official Proceedings of the Board, the historical record of Board meeting minutes specifically pertaining to the changes to the rules and regulations previously discussed. For example, the Official Proceedings illustrate the official shifts in recess policies, but provide no information on the reasons for or the discussions which led to the policy shifts. Unfortunately, the transcripts of these Board meetings were not available at the Board of Education archives.

### Timeline

This historical analysis of recess begins in 1855, the earliest record of recess policy in Chicago. Although the wording of the recess policy shifted

throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recess seemed to remain a constant part of the school day. Policy documents reveal that for 105 years, time was allocated for recess within the school day. It should also be noted that from 1855 to 1990 recess was not adjacent to the lunch hour.

Then in 1991 a drastic policy shift completely eliminated recess. From then on, it was officially absent from the Board's yearly Rules and Regulations publication. However, in 1998 a new regular school hours' policy was put into place. This new policy, which remained in place until 2006, allowed each individual school to decide upon how to allocate their school day as long as there was a minimum of 300 minutes of instructional work per day. This new policy made it possible for recess to find its way back into to the school day. However, this was dependent upon the administration, teacher's union representative, and the local school council. Due to the number of parties which needed to be unified to restore recess, only one-third of schools choose to bring back recess.

#### Evolution of Recess Policy Language

From 1855-2006, there were small tweaks as well as large revisions made to CPS's recess policy. As a result different details within the policy can be traced across this time period. The first shift that can be seen was the time allocated to recess and its schedule within the school day. Beginning in 1855 Chicago's school regulations stated that recess should be allowed for all students



and should not exceed 15 minutes (City of Chicago, 1855). This illustrated that younger students in primary schools as well as older students grammar schools received an equal recess period. However, three years later a differentiation was made between primary and grammar school's recess. The 1858 rules declared that primary school pupils recess would not exceed 20 minutes, where as grammar schools recess would not exceed 15 minutes (Board of Education, 1858). This time differentiation between primary and grammar schools in the recess policy remained the same until 1890. Then in 1891 the policy allocated not only the time of the recess period but it also stated the time of day in which recess was to be held. The policy stated that both schools' recesses should have taken place each forenoon (Board of Education, 1891). It should be noted that this policy remained the same until 1904.

Then in 1905 the differentiation of primary and grammar school were removed from the policy. This shift placed recess solely within the elementary school day. Another modification to this policy was the allocation of a morning and afternoon recess. According to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Superintendent Cooley wanted to allow for additional play time for children ("Two", 1904). This policy articulated that all elementary pupils were given a 15 minute morning recess and a 10 minute afternoon recess (Board of Education, 1905). This allocation remained the same within the recess policy until 1990.

Another aspect of recess policy which can be traced from 1858 to 1910 is the suggestion of a less active indoor recess. This was first seen in the 1858 policy. However, the policy is unclear regarding what particular situation would have called for recess to be held indoors, be it weather or individual's behavior; this statement does illustrate a possibility of indoor recess taking place as early as 1858. This possibility becomes even clearer in the 1869 policy which read, "All pupils shall be required to pass out of the schoolroom at recess...but they shall never be required to remain out when the exposure would be injurious to their health" (Board of Education, 1869). Unlike the 1958 policy, this illustrated clearly that recess would have been moved indoors due to bad weather.

The details of indoor recess became even clearer in the 1905 to 1910 policy which revealed the following:

If the absence of a suitable playground makes an out of door recess impracticable, pupils shall have a recreation period of the usual length in their rooms or in the corridors of the building. In such case, all pupils desiring it shall be given an opportunity to leave the room, either during the recess period or soon thereafter (Board of Education, 1905).

This policy illustrated where indoor recess would have taken place as well as recess' flexibility within the school day's schedule. It also showed that perhaps not all schools at this time had an adequate playground or school yard to accommodate outdoor recess. It should be noted that only within this brief period is the inclusion of playgrounds mentioned within the recess policy. Perhaps this

was because policy took place in the midst of the Playground Movement. As a result, playgrounds were seen to have intricate role within recess.

In addition this 1905 policy stated, "Pupils shall not under any circumstances be deprived of recess" (Board of Education, 1905). These concrete instructions illustrated that although the specific location of recess at this time was unknown, the policy did enforce recess for all students. This trend to mandate recess for all students had only a brief history within CPS from 1905-1910.

The final aspect that can be traced throughout this historical analysis was the power to omit or adjust the recess period. The first time that power was given to adjust recess is in the 1889 and 1904 rules and regulations, which stated, "Principals may in their discretion omit morning recess, except a short recess for the Primary Grades" (Board of Education, 1889 & 1904). This statement illustrated that from 1889 to 1904 recess could have been omitted for those in grammar school. However, no explanation was given as to what would have caused a principal to have chosen to omit recess. Similarly, little is known as to how often recess was excluded for the school day, as will be later discussed.

Surprisingly, the power to omit recess was absent from the 1905 to 1921 recess policies. Then, as previously mentioned, in 1922 a stagnant policy was written which remained the same for 68 years. The policy included the statement

“unless the General Superintendent of Schools otherwise orders” (Board of Education, 1922 & 1990). Unlike the earlier policies which gave power to principals to omit recess, this new parameter of the policy gave the General Superintendent an immense amount of power over recess.

Only one incident was found in which the General Superintendent used the power given in this policy to alter recess. According to a 1947 article in the Chicago Daily Tribune, Superintendent George F. Cassell forced recess indoors so that the schools’ doors could remain closed throughout the day to conserve CPS’s coal supply (“Order,” 1947). This article illustrated that when necessary superintendents most likely used the flexibility and power within the policy to omit or alter recess when it was beneficial to the Board of Education. The possible use of this power will be investigated later in this work.

#### Recess’ Absence and Attempted Rebirth

As previously mentioned, in 1991, after 68 years of the same policy, recess came to an abrupt halt due to a new policy regarding schools’ hours, which did not include any recess session during the school day. This new policy stated, “Unless the General Superintendent of Schools otherwise recommends and the Board approves the elementary school day shall commence at 9:00 A.M. and close at 3:15 P.M., with a 45 minute lunch period” (Board of Education, 1991). In addition to the elimination of recess, this policy gave less power to the

superintendent, as any changes to the school day would have had to have been approved by the Board.

Similar to the policy shifts mentioned earlier, the Board's reasoning behind this drastic shift was unknown since the proceedings from the Board meetings in which this policy shift took place gave no reason for the abolishment of recess in CPS. In a later section, possible reasons behind this policy change will be discussed.

Ironically, in 1991, while the recess policy was being eliminated, CPS spent a vast amount of money on building a new school playground on the city's west side. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, a new school playground was being partially designed by the students at Grant School. The project was estimated to cost \$180,000 and was going to be funded by CPS, the Chicago Housing Authority, and the Chicago Park District (Rittner, 1991). As a result, CPS' share of this project would have cost \$60,000. This was a drastic amount of money to spend on a playground which would not be used during the school day. This was especially true when many schools across the city were overcrowded and did not have ample books and supplies.

Seven year later, an official means for recess' rebirth was made possible by a new school hours' policy. The 1998 policy stated, "The specific hours of operation of an attendance center may vary to reflect the scheduling needs of particular schools; however, all schools must maintain regular hours of operation

that provide all students with a minimum of 300 minutes of instructional work per day” (Board of Education, 1998). Unlike its counterpart, this new policy focused on the needs of individual schools as well as students’ time on task. It also removed the Board’s and superintendent’s power and placed it in the hands of each individual school. This immense change allowed for the rebirth of recess. However, the policy allowed for the revitalization of recess only if the school administration placed a high value on it and the teachers and parents supported it.

The procedure to reinstate recess was fairly simple if all necessary parties were in agreement to the changes in the school day. Under the teachers’ union contract article 4-13, to lengthen the lunch period to include recess required the approval of a committee which consisted of the principal, three teachers which represented the faculty, the union delegate, and three parents from the local school council (Duffrin, 2005). Unfortunately, few schools chose to use the flexibility of the policy to reinstate recess for its students.

Seven years after the 1998 policy shift, recess was still not present in most schools. A 2005 *Catalyst Chicago* telephone survey found that only 18 percent of schools included recess in their daily schedule and only six percent of schools provided a recess of at least 20 minutes (Duffrin, 2005). This data suggests two possible reasons for this low percentage of schools with recess. First, school administrators, teachers, and parents were unable to unite to

reinstate recess. Secondly, some schools place little value on recess due to extenuating circumstances, such as the continuous pressure to raise test scores.

The 1998 policy was still in place when CPS, like other school districts across the nation, adopted a local school wellness policy. The policy primarily focused on nutrition education, food and beverage regulation for those served in schools, and physical activity. However, little focus was placed on recess within this policy. Regarding physical activity the policy sought to mandate the following:

Increase the number of students who engage in continuous physical activities (moderate) for a minimum of 15 to 30 minutes on 5 or more days per week through participation in one or more of the following: community programs, after school programs, and recess (Board of Education, 2006).

The policy suggested community programs and after school programs ahead of recess. The Board could never have mandated these programs for all students, but it could have regulated recess. Unlike the other suggestions for physical activity, recess could have been a fixed part children's school day. This 2006 policy begs the question of whether or not the Board of Education placed any value on physical play within the school day. Specifically, why did they not use the local wellness policy to reinstate recess?

This answer becomes clear in an article dated two months after the Local Wellness Policy was adopted. The Chief of Schools at that time, Arne Duncan, remarked how the new policy took only a small step to reinstate recess in Chicago schools. In the October 23, 2006, *Chicago Tribune* article Duncan is

quoted as saying, “My goal would be to have recess present in every school but there are various hurdles to overcome...the teachers contract, lack of space and supervision, and safety concerns in high-crime neighborhoods” (Dell’Angela, 2006, p. 1). Duncan’s response illustrates the hopelessness of having recess present in every school. His statements also demonstrate that the Local Wellness Policy was not going to result in recess becoming a daily fixture in Chicago’s schools as it still required buy in from administrators, teachers, and parents. This new policy was by no means a quick fix to bring back recess.

Four years later CPS still cites the 2006 Local School Wellness Policy as their stance on recess on the district’s website. According to the CPS website, the Local Wellness Policy:

Reflects the District’s commitment to children’s health and recognizes the critical role that school can play in fostering lifelong habits of healthy eating and sustained physical activity. Providing opportunities for physical activity during the day increase the likelihood for children to be successful in school (Chicago Public Schools, 2010).

This statement by CPS is hypocritical. It states that the district is fully committed to the policy. If this was in fact the case, though, why not mandate the recess policy instead of gently suggesting it? This is especially true as this statement suggests that being provided with opportunities for physical play during recess is tied to children’s success in the classroom. This statement illustrates that CPS is setting Chicago’s children up for failure by not providing opportunities for physical play throughout the school day. This policy illustrates



the Board of Education's lack of commitment to improve the health and wellness of Chicago's children.

### Incidents during Recess

What can we learn about Chicago's recess policy from newspaper reports? From 1897 to 1990 there were a variety of incidents which took place during recess. The incidents, some more brutal and tragic than others, must have played a role in the 1991 policy shift. These incidents illustrate the challenges teachers and school administration had to deal with throughout this period of time. As a result, the power given to superintendents in the 1922-1990 policy allowed for them to intervene and cancel recess when they deemed it to be necessary. Perhaps these incidents even caused superintendents, like Cassel in 1947, to use their power to cancel recess temporarily or permanently at particular schools or, in more extreme cases, across the district.

These recess incidents ranged from violent acts between students to crimes committed when students left the schools' grounds. First, violence among school children was more common than one might think during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This violence reportedly involved individual students as well as large groups of students. The first recorded incident of recess violence took place in 1897. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, pupils at Moseley School were participating in race wars. These fights between white and black students took place when traveling to and from school, as well as during recess. Unlike the

fights which happened to and from school, those which took place on the school grounds during recess had to be broken up by the supervising teachers (“Pupils”, 1897). It can be assumed that breaking up fights was disliked by teachers as it put their own safety in harm’s way.

Similar to today, bullying also took place at school, particularly at recess. On February 4, 1913 the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that two boys were arraigned after a knife was used to forcibly steal a half dollar from a classmate during morning recess (“Boy Tug”, 1913). Another incidence of bullying was evident in an editorial writing by Fred Drews, parent of a six year old boy at Harriet Beecher Stowe School. Drews cited many instances in which a number of older boys tormented his son during recess. As a result, his son was forced to hide during recess because he feared getting beat up (“Cruelty”, 1938.)

In some cases bullying resulted in more violent acts including stabbings and shootings. According to the *Chicago Defender*, a 13 year old was stabbed in the thigh when he was coming out of the building during recess (“Stabs”, 1927). In 1960, another recess stabbing occurred. A brief article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* verified that John Johnson was stabbed during recess in the stomach near the Manley Elementary playground (“School”, 1960). Then in 1965, a nine-year-old boy was shot by another classmate during recess at Dewey School (“Boy”, 1965). Nine years later the *Chicago Defender* reported that a 12-year-old girl was in custody after stabbing a fellow classmate with a steak knife in her

back and face during morning recess; a teacher was able to break up the fight and recover the knife (“Hold”, 1974).

Gang violence also took place during recess. In 1968 a student shot six times into a crowd of 400 children during morning recess. The *Chicago Daily Defender* reported that during this incident a 14-year-old was shot by a rival gang member while playing baseball at Wadsworth School (“Youth”, 1968).

In addition to violence, cars also caused a danger to children during recess. In 1927, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that due to the number of children who had been killed by cars across the city, the police department was working on preventative measures with the Board. One suggested means was to barricade side streets during recess (“Police”, 1927). Additional precautions were suggested to aide in children’s safety. A 1943 article in the *Chicago Defender* urged parents to talk to their children about running into the street during recess after 47 children were accidentally killed when they dashed into the street the prior year (“Parents”, 1943). Sadly, these precautions were not enough. In 1957, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that a six-year-old girl was killed by a physician’s car after she darted in the street during recess (“Girl Pupil”, 1957).

Like cars, stray dogs also caused harm to children during recess. According to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, a dog who had been suffering from rabies bit three children during recess at Grant School (“Three”, 1908). A similar

incident occurred in 1943, when a dog bit seven children on their legs and hands during recess at Calhoun Elementary School (“Bitten”, 1943).

During recess children were also vulnerable to assault, kidnap, and solicitors. For example, in 1899, a man nicknamed “Jack the Clipper” had been watching the children play on the grounds of Lewis-Chaplin School during recess and grabbed a girl. He carried her for a block then proceeded to cut off her braids. The girl was able to run back to school safely (“Jack”, 1899). Four years later another girl was grabbed during recess at O’Toole School. According to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, two of the girl’s aunts who were dressed in mourning veils entered the school grounds to kidnap the girl (“Steal”, 1903). Then in 1908, children in Englewood were given samples of whisky by a distribution agent and encouraged to drink them during recess. As a result, one child drank until she was unconscious (“Whisky”, 1908).

Sadly, during recess children, especially girls, were vulnerable to molestation and rape by outside parties, schoolmates, and teachers. The first known incident took place in 1939. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that a crippled girl who was indoors during recess was sexually assaulted at Lawson Grammar School. A man illegally entered the school and told the girl that her teacher wanted her to retrieve some books from a room. The man followed the girl into the room and sexually assaulted her (“Girl”, 1939). Similarly in 1982 during indoor recess another girl was allegedly raped. As reported by *Chicago*

*Tribune* reporters, Eileen Ogintz and Phillip Wattley, a seventh grade girl reported being raped by three sixth grade boys in her classroom during recess. Unfortunately, no charges were filed against the boys because there was a lapse between when the rape was reported and when the girl was examined in the hospital. As a result the boys were only suspended from school for the alleged rape (Ogintz & Wattley, 1982). Five years later, a first grade teacher was indicted on charges of sexually assaulting her student. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the teacher at Woodson South School would keep the victim in the classroom during recess. The teacher reportedly told the female victim that she would kill her and her mother if the girl reported the abuse ("First", 1987).

It can be assumed that accidents commonly occurred during recess, although some were much more serious than a scraped knee or a broken arm. According to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, a student at Hurley School was injured when playing with an industrial cartridge during recess which exploded in his hands ("Boy Pupil", 1956).

Then in 1987, a life-changing accident occurred at McKay School when a sixth grade boy who was playing kickball collided with another boy during recess. The injured boy was taken to the principal's office where he was vomiting and complaining of a headache. The boy's mother was notified and asked that her son be taken to Holy Cross Hospital which was located across from the school. Despite the closeness of the hospital, the school principal followed the Board's

rule which required that an injured student be transported to the hospital via ambulance. After three 911 calls and an hour and twenty minutes later, the ambulance finally arrived. Due to the delay of his medical attention, the boy suffered brain damage and the right side of his body was paralyzed. As a result of this tragic accident, the boy's mother filed a lawsuit against CPS (Mount, 1984).

The play spaces in which recess was held also played a role in the safety of children. For example, in 1964, Reavis School, located on the city's south side, contained no playground despite the fact that the school was built in 1958. During recess children played on a lot which contained broken glass, beer cans, and other items left behind by the street sweepers (Shirley, 1964). One can only imagine the number of accidents which could have occurred during recess at Reavis, because not only was the play space dangerous, but also the lack of equipment gave few safe activities for the children to participate in during recess. It can also be assumed that Reavis was not the only school which was without a playground or an adequate space to play during recess.

In addition to the harmful incidents which took place during recess, crimes also were reportedly committed by students. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, five north side students from three different schools were arrested for burglarizing 20 houses during recess ("Link", 1971). Similarly, 12 years earlier, Al Foster wrote an editorial in the *Daily Defender* which called for better recess

supervision to assist in the prevention of school vandalism. According to Foster, each year thousands of dollars were spent to repair damage done by student vandals (Foster, 1959).

In all of the incidents previously mentioned, the free time given to children during recess, the challenges of supervising them in a large open space as they played, and children's vulnerability to the outside world when on the school grounds all affected the outcome of each situation. Sadly it is unknown if and how the Board responded to each of these incidents. However, how could the Board not respond when innocent children were being harmed during the recess? Therefore, following some of the more extreme incidents, did the superintendent cancel recess at a particular school or across the city? In addition, did these incidents collectively lead to the cancelation of recess in 1991? Was the 68 year recess policy being enforced daily in all city schools?

Unfortunately, news articles illustrate that not all CPS students were privileged to receive recess despite the policy. Although there is no correlation between any of the previously mentioned schools, three *Chicago Tribune* articles illustrate that recess was pulled from schools prior to the 1991 policy shift.

In 1974, a *Chicago Tribune* article about the killing of Rudolph Jezek, who was the principal at Barton Elementary School, illustrated that the Board did eliminate recess at this Southside School. Staff reporter Micheal Kirkhorn cited that twelve years earlier the neighborhood surrounding the school was made up

of predominantly white families whose children attended Barton. However, at the time of Jezek's death the school was extremely overcrowded and 90% of its student population was African American. Incidentally, the article also stated that students were unable to go outside for recess (Kirkhorn, 1974). This article illustrates the absence of recess prior to the 1991 policy shift. It also indicates that there were inconsistencies across the city regarding the recess policy as early as 1974.

In 1988, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a series called, "Chicago schools: Worst in America – An examination of the public schools that fail Chicago," which was a six month in-depth study of a neighborhood elementary school on the north side, William C. Goudy School. In the series, reporters cite many unfair disadvantages students at Goudy face. Like Barton, Goudy was overcrowded, with some classrooms having up to 39 students. However, the student population at Goudy consisted of black, white, and Hispanic children. The reporters specifically mention the absence of recess as well as a playground at Goudy ("Welcome", 1988).

Although written 14 years apart, articles about Barton and Goudy School illustrate that towards the end of this stagnant policy, from 1922-1990, recess was not enforced in every school. Although the location and demographics differ between the schools, both Barton and Goudy School were overcrowded. Perhaps the supervision of recess was difficult in these overcrowded schools. It



can be assumed that these were not the only overcrowded schools in the district. In how many other schools was recess absent from the daily schedule? Sadly, the exact answer to this question is unknown. In a 1988 collaborative report, *Chicago Tribune* staff reporters claimed that CPS was a system filled with “institutionalized child neglect.” Their report cited a number of disparities among schools across the city, one being the absence of recess at some schools, which resulted in children being forced to remain inside the school building for the entire day (Reardon et al., 1988). These articles serve as evidence that the yearly publication of the Rules and Regulations of CPS was not the ultimate authority over school policy, especially that which involved recess.

#### Teachers’ Response to Recess

What can we learn about recess policy when we examine the role teachers played in the recess period? Although the first statement which outlined teachers’ supervision of recess was in the 1951 Handbook of Policies and Procedures, it can be assumed that teachers always played some role in the supervision of recess (Board of Education, 1951). This assumption is due to the structure of early elementary schools, which did not include an abundance of aides or support staffs which became more common in late 20<sup>th</sup> century schools’ structure.

Prior to 1967 the only support that was given to teachers to assist in the supervision of recess was through older students. A 1937 article published by

the Board of Education (1937) praised the use of older boys to patrol and oversee recess at some schools for keeping children safe. Similarly in an article published in the Chicago Schools Journal, Ralph A. Pignato and William A. Watters discussed the use of older students as “play leaders” during pupil-supervised recess at Samuel B. Morse Elementary School. According to Pignato and Watters (1956), “Pupil-supervised recess was less demanding of teachers’ time and attention” (p. 153). At Morse Elementary School, students’ role in recess supervision was used to relieve teachers from this task. In both situations, older students were pulled from their classes to supervise recess. Therefore, it can be assumed that principals felt that it was more important to relieve teachers of the non-teaching task of recess supervision than keeping older children in the classrooms. Was this because teachers disliked and possibly objected to their recess duties? Were teachers affected by the incidents which were taking place during recess? From stabbings to tragic accidents, how could teachers have not been affected by the incidents which were taking place across the city during recess? During recess it was the supervising teacher’s role to mediate and keep the children safe, like in the 1974 fight which resulted with the stabbing of a girl in the back and face with a steak knife. This brutal fight was broken up by a teacher who put her own safety at risk to recover the knife and separate the girls.

Although it is unknown what exactly sparked teachers' unfavorable opinion of recess supervision, their dislike soon became apparent to the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU). As a result, teachers began to seek for a solution to their recess and lunchroom duties. In a December 7, 1966, press release, CTU President John E. Desmond remarked, "Teachers are ambitious to devote their time to teaching and not spending an excessive amount of their day performing clerical duties and monitoring playgrounds and lunch rooms" (Chicago Teachers' Union, 1966). Although this statement by the former president of the CTU did not explain why teachers disliked supervising recess, it is clear that they no longer wished to oversee recess.

The CTU continued to plead with the Board of Education that the teachers' sole task was teaching, not overseeing recess and lunch, and as a result 300 teacher aides were hired the following year. One of the many tasks of these new teacher aides was taking over the supervision of recess ("New", 1967). It should be noted that this article failed to mention if the aides were evenly distributed among the entire city's elementary schools.

As a result, although teacher aides were hired to relieve teachers' from non-teaching duties like recess, there were discrepancies across the city. An article in the Chicago Union Teacher (1969) compared teachers' duties at Fulton and Spencer Elementary Schools. The article pointed out that the teachers at Fulton School, located on the south side, had no recess duty due to the use of

the teacher aides. On the other hand, the teachers at Spencer School, located on the west side, had to supervise recess (“A Study”, 1969). This shows that the use of teachers’ aides to supervise recess was not consistently used in all schools. For this reason, perhaps teacher aides were not an absolute solution to relieve teachers from recess supervision.

Over time it became evident that the hiring of teacher aides was a small solution to a large problem within CPS. Twenty-one years after the teachers’ aides were a fixed position in school, teachers were still seeking a change in their supervision duties. In an advertisement for the Teachers’ Action Caucus (TAC), the following demands were proposed, “Teachers must be liberated from nonprofessional duties. Teachers should be allowed to spend all of their time on the task of educating students...they should not have to spend time on non-educational duties such as lunchroom and playground supervision” (“Teachers”, 1988).

Maybe more aides needed to be hired and evenly distributed among schools to relieve teachers of their recess duties. Nonetheless, it is evident that the majority of teachers were unhappy about having to supervise recess. Therefore, the voice of Chicago’s teachers resulted in the abolishment of the Board’s mandated recess policy. CTU wanted to partially place power to choose whether or not recess had a place in their schools into the hands of the teachers

as evidenced by the article 4-13 of teachers' contract in 1998 as mentioned earlier.

#### National Pressure to Abolish Recess

In addition to the pressure from teachers to bring an end to recess, national studies sought to eliminate recess. In 1981, the findings of an 18 year study of American public schools by John Goodlad of UCLA was published in an article in the *Chicago Tribune*. It stated that children were receiving limited instructional time due to long recess and lunch periods ("Schools", 1981). Two weeks later, staff reporter Casey Banas published an article which stated that the "new" problem in education was "time on task." Banas not only restated Goodlad's research but also highlighted another study from Michigan State which found that, "42% of the school day was being wasted by recess, lunch, transitions between lessons, classroom interruptions and assemblies" (Banas, 1981). It is unclear whether or not the Board's shift in policy was immediately affected by this "time on task" data. However, the 1998 policy shift, which allowed for the rebirth of recess, clearly mandated a minimum of 300 instructional minutes per day (Board of Education, 1998). Despite the fact that this shift took place 17 years after the research findings, the Board sought to control students' instructional time so that it would not be taken over by non-instructional learning time such as recess.

## Conclusion

From 1855-2006, there were both small shifts and drastic changes to CPS' recess policy. For 135 years, recess was a cornerstone of the school day. Throughout this large time span, small tweaks were made to the long standing policy, but despite these small shifts the core values of the policy remained. Then in 1991, the policy was completely abolished for seven years. Finally, in 1998 and again in 2006, new policies allowed recess to receive a chance for rebirth. However, local newspaper archives illustrate that the recess policy was not an accurate account of what was actually taking place in the city's schools. Two reasons for this prevail. First, recess was not being mandated in certain schools. This possibly had to do with schools being overcrowded, such as Barton and Goudy School. The second reason was that superintendents were using the loophole within the policy to cancel recess due to incidents which threatened safety of students and teachers or those which placed the city at litigious risk.

Although it has been concluded that incidents during the recess period and national pressure from new research studies affected the extreme shift which eliminated recess, the Board of Education and powerful teachers' union were the real force behind the shifts in recess policy. As stated earlier, the Board was influenced by incidents which took place during recess as well as the media attention caused as a result of these recess incidents. Teachers, the primary

supervisors of recess, had to mediate students' conflicts and keep children safe during play time. In some cases, teachers were placed in harm's way as when stabbings and shootings took place during recess.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century teachers began to verbalize their dislike of non-teaching duties, such as recess. For a time, older students were used to supervise recess; however, this pulled students from their own studies. Then, due to pressure from CTU, the Board hired teachers' aides to supervise recess, among other tasks. Unfortunately, there was an insufficient number of aides to meet the needs of all city teachers. Then finally, in 1998, teachers were able to decide, along with other school officials and parents, the fate of recess in their schools.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

This historical analysis only scratches the surface of the history of recess in Chicago. A comparative historical analysis of CPS and Chicago's parochial schools' recess policy could be conducted to better understand trends within the policy shifts at a local level as well as to reveal if the school systems were influenced by changes to each other's policies.

At a state level, a historical analysis could be carried out to identify the history of recess policy when comparing a small rural district to that of CPS. This type of research would reveal common trends within recess policy as well as highlight discrepancies between large and small districts recess policies.

At a national level, comprehensive analysis could be undertaken to compare the history of recess policies within the three largest school districts: New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. This type of study could highlight national trends within recess policy. More importantly, it would begin to establish the history of recess in the United States; history which, as Pelligrini pointed out, is currently unknown.



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## VITA

Before attending Loyola University Chicago, Laura Ann Wurzbarger attended St. Ambrose University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education in 2003. Upon graduation, she accepted a teaching position for Chicago Public Schools, where she taught until 2007. Later that year, she took a position at the Chicago Children's Museum, where she learned firsthand the valuable learning that takes place for children at play. This paper fulfills her desire to incorporate her experience as a Chicago Public School teacher with her expertise in children's learning through play that she has developed at the Chicago Children's Museum.

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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