

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Opportunities for Free Play Show Cognitive Benefits for Middle School Students

At Benchmark School, it has always been an intentional decision to give all students—lower and middle school—opportunities to play safely and meaningfully each day with a scheduled recess time.

However, recent studies on play prompted middle school faculty to consider expanding that time even further. For example Gwen Dewar, Ph.D states that play appears to “have positive effects on the brain and on a child’s ability to learn...and may function as an important, if not crucial, mode for learning.” Pellegrino and Holmes (2006) report that students pay more attention to academics after they have had a recess—an unstructured break in which kids are free to play without direction from adults.

As a result of their deep dive into the literature on play, last fall the middle school faculty made a few adjustments to the schedule to allow students to engage in more physical activity and time away from the regular classroom experience. What they have found is that these changes have paid off in increased focus, interest, and enthusiasm among our students.

Middle school students are now given the opportunity to engage in physical activity outdoors for 20 minutes before the beginning of the school day. The students are enjoying time together playing Frisbee, tossing a football, and generally engaging in some form of outdoor physical activity. Teachers have reported that students are entering their first period class more focused and ready to learn. “It’s proven to be a nice opportunity for the students to expend some energy, get some fresh air, and socialize with each other (as opposed to staring at their laptops) in the mornings,” said faculty member Alex Templeton. “I think the students appreciate an extra chance to play.”

Another change to the middle school program is the opportunity for students to explore topics they are interested in learning more about during their Friday Mentor Group meeting. The students’ interests resulted in the formation of 12 clubs: Walking Club, Zentangle/Craft Club, Yearbook Club, Animé Club, Yoga Club, Board Games Club, Photography Club, Building Club (legos/K’Nex), Drama/Public Speaking Club, Ukulele Club, Dance Club, and Coding Club. The clubs meet every Friday during the mentor group period. “I think the kids enjoy the break from routine and an opportunity to mix with different grade levels,” said Middle School Supervisor Marianne Smith. “They get to be in a group based on their interests rather than their age and to enjoy socializing in a not-so-academic learning activity.” In addition, the Friday clubs give the students another outlet to practice the creative problem solving skills that they are acquiring in the classroom.

In light of the benefits that have been observed—most critically that students pay more attention to academic tasks when they are given brief opportunities for free play—it is the goal of the middle school to continue with these changes to the program and be open to ways that it can be improved upon based on the needs of students. After all, “play is the highest form of research.” [Albert Einstein].



1: Middle School students enjoying their time outside before their first period class. • **2:** Board Games Club • **3:** Building Club • **4:** Zentangle/Craft Club