

Outdoor play is essential for healthy child development

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If you ask a school-aged child, "What's your favorite part of the school day?" chances are you're going to hear about recess. Yet the sad reality is that parents and concerned educators have been fighting with Florida legislators for years for our children's right to play. This is in spite of the fact that the American Academy of Pediatrics asserts that play – particularly outdoor play – is critical to the health, well-being and academic development of children.

Since 2001, schools around the country have been forced to cut back on recess when the federal law known as No Child Left Behind mandated standardized testing in all 50 states. Other subject areas – particularly the arts and physical education – suffered as teachers redistributed time to prepare students for the testing. Recess took a huge hit across the country to varying degrees; studies have shown that children who attend high-poverty – in particular high-density, urban areas – are far more likely than children in other locations to get little to no recess at all.

In Florida, a movement dubbed the “recess moms” has fought to get mandatory daily recess, not only for their own young children but for all Florida elementary students. Thanks in part to social media and the rising frustration with testing mandates, the movement picked up steam: earlier this year, the Florida legislature passed a bill that requires elementary schools to set aside a mere 20 minutes each day for “free play recess.”

Last week, the Florida Department of Education told school superintendents that there is nothing in the most recent law that says where recess has to take place, meaning that schools can hold free-play recess indoors. We believe this is a mistake.

At the Hershorin Schiff Community Day School, we recognize that it is crucial to children’s physical, emotional and intellectual development to play and learn outdoors. Our students participate in outdoor environmental science, service learning, physical education, free play breaks, yoga, and special observances – they spend at least an hour per day outside. This is not only good for the healthy development of children but is also fun for them.

There are numerous local community resources that offer the opportunity for children to enjoy hands-on learning in the great outdoors as well: we have explored Historic Spanish Point to enhance our learning of early Floridians, waded into the Bay at Mote Marine to study sea life, and held backyard interviews with the residents of Aviva - A Campus for Senior Life. Some of our very best learning and teaching takes place outdoors.

It is important to recognize that active outdoor learning does not sacrifice rigor. Our students achieve advanced honors and IB level mastery of skills, all while actively learning through outdoor exploration, research and play.

Studies have shown conclusively that kids display better behavior, focus and attention when they have “brain breaks” that take them outside. Children who are outdoors are much more likely to be physically active; a recent article in *Time Magazine* asserts that today’s teens are as sedentary as 60-year-olds. Insufficient physical activity leads to a greater number of adults with an increased danger of serious health issues, such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease, down the road.

Noted educator Margaret McMillan said, “The best classroom and the richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky.” We offer our most fervent wishes and hopes that all school children across our beautiful state will enjoy their time under the sun (and clouds), each and every day.