

Nutritionists say scheduling recess before lunch is best for students, schools

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For the sake of better student appetites and attention spans, more than two-dozen Montana elementary schools are revamping an elementary school tradition that is as well established as apples for the teacher and schoolhouse bells.

The schools are involved with the successful Recess Before Lunch policy that swaps the traditional order of lunch followed by recess. Montana Team Nutrition, a program overseen by the Office of Public Instruction, School Nutrition Programs is based at Montana State University in Bozeman. Nutritionists from Montana Team Nutrition say studies prove that students play, eat and study better if recess precedes lunch, instead of the other way around.

"Recess Before Lunch is a small change that nets huge rewards in children's behavior," said Molly Stenberg, a registered dietitian with the Montana Team Nutrition Program at MSU. Team Nutrition is working with the Office of Public Instruction to urge elementary schools statewide to implement the program. Stenberg said the program makes nutritional sense because students are hungrier and eat better if they play before they eat.

"Teachers feel that kids are more settled and ready to start afternoon classes if they have recess before lunch. The atmosphere in the lunchroom is more relaxed if students are not rushing through lunch to get outside."

That is the experience of Kim DeBruycker, principal of Gallatin Gateway School, who instituted Recess Before Lunch at her school a year ago for first through fourth grades. Finances were a key reason that DeBruycker made the change. She wanted to reduce expenses for playground aides. Whatever the initial reason, the switch to Recess Before Lunch for younger students has had a positive impact on the behavior of the entire school, DeBruycker said. "We really like it."

"When the younger kids go to recess before lunch, students solve many social problems that might have come up before they come back to class and don't bring arguments into the classroom. And, they don't take 10 minutes of class time to become settled after lunch. They get right to their work."

DeBruycker said she chose the younger students for the Recess Before Lunch policy because older students are better able to wait to get out on the playground and they also understand the importance of a good lunch. And even though she had to buy another oven to make the program work, the program has been economical for Gallatin Gateway.

"The students eat better and there's a lot less waste," DeBruycker said. Indeed, on one recent day when scalloped potatoes were on the menu, there was little waste and many of the children went back for seconds.

Stenberg said the Recess Before Lunch policy was initiated in several pilot sites including - Lewistown, Conrad and Whitefish- and the concept seems to be spreading by word of mouth.

"It usually takes schools a little effort to make the switch to Recess Before Lunch," Stenberg said. "We've found it's well worth the effort."

Montana schools that have implemented Recess Before Lunch include:

- **Belgrade:** Ridge View Elementary School (grades 2 and 4)
 - **Belt:** Belt Public Schools.
 - **Billings:** Central Heights School.
 - **Bonner:** Potomac Elementary.
 - **Conrad:** Meadowlark School (grades K-2).
 - **East Helena:** Radley Elementary School (grades 3-5).
 - **Frenchtown:** Frenchtown School (grades 7-8).
 - **Gallatin Gateway:** Gallatin Gateway Elementary (grades K-3).
 - **Great Falls:** Mountain View School.
 - **Havre:** Highland Park Early Primary (grades K-1); Lincoln McKinley Primary (grade 2); Sunnyside Intermediate (grades 4-5).
 - **Helena:** Helena Middle School (grades 6-8), CR Anderson Middle School (grade 6), Broadwater Elementary, Central Elementary, Bryant Elementary, Keesler Elementary, Four Georgians (grade 5 only).
 - **Lewistown:** Highland Park School (grades K-2).
 - **Melstone:** Melstone Public Schools (grades K-6).
 - **Missoula:** Hawthorne School (grades K-5); Lewis and Clark School; Paxson School; Russell School; Hellgate Elementary (grades K-2).
 - **Seeley Lake:** Seeley Lake Elementary.
 - **Sidney:** Rau Elementary School.
 - **Valier:** Valier School.
 - **Whitefish:** Whitefish Central School (grades 5-8).
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