

PLAY, POLICY AND POTENTIAL:

A Toolkit to Support Advancing Recess
in Schools Through State Laws

December 2025



This toolkit was developed by the STRONG Research Team (Striving To Reach Optimal Nutrition and Growth) in the Department of Population, Family and Reproductive Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, collaborators from the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, and an advisory board of experts in recess policy, practice and research (described below).

Contact Information:

Erin Hager, PhD
Professor

Department of Population,
Family and Reproductive
Health

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg
School of Public Health
ehager1@jhu.edu

Rachel Deitch, MS
Program Officer

Department of Population,
Family and Reproductive
Health

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg
School of Public Health
rdeitch1@jhu.edu

Kerri Lowrey, JD
Director for Grants Management
& Research, Legal Resource
Center for Public Health Policy
Deputy Director, The Network
for Public Health Law, Eastern
Region

University of Maryland Francis
King Carey School of Law
klowrey@law.umaryland.edu

Funding: This work was supported by the Bloomberg American Health Initiative at the Bloomberg School through a Policy Package Award.

The toolkit was made public on December 15th, 2025 during a convening of state legislators, advocates, educators, and health professionals that focused on state-level recess policies to promote physical activity for school-age children throughout the US. The toolkit is available on the Bloomberg American Health Initiative website: <https://americanhealth.jhu.edu>.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to acknowledge the important role of our **advisory board** in developing this toolkit. Advisory board members are listed below, alphabetically by the name of their organization.

ORGANIZATION	WEBSITE	ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER(S)
AFT	aft.org	Chelsea Prax
Arizona Department of Education	azed.gov	Keri Schoeff
East Hartford Public Schools	easthartford.org	Tracy Stefano
Free State PTA	fspta.org	Ashley Cotton
Maryland Advisory Council on Health and Physical Education	marylandpublicschools.org/about/Pages/DCAA/PE/Advisory-Council.aspx	Jason Semanoff
National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)	naesp.org	David Griffith
The School Superintendents Association (AASA)	aasa.org	Kayla Jackson
National Association of School Nursing (NASN)	nasn.org	Kathy Schulz
National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, Behavioral Research Program, Health Behaviors Research Branch	class.cancer.gov	David Berrigan Frank Perna
SHAPE America (Society of Health and Physical Educators)	shapeamerica.org	Carly Wright
SHAPE Maryland	shapemd.org	Jim Barry
Special Olympics International	specialolympics.org	Melissa Otterbein
University of California Nutrition Policy Institute	ucanr.edu/program/nutrition-policy-institute	Hannah Thompson
Utah State University	usu.edu	Kimberly Clevenger

We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Divya Konduru, Joyce Chung, Raquel Arbaiza, and Nicole Brennick, who supported the legal research and development of toolkit sections.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Recess Policy Score Card	14
Legal Research Summary	21
State Profiles	25
Model Recess Legislation	29
Implementation Challenges and Solutions	32
Building a Coalition to Introduce Recess Laws	35
Key Stakeholder Questions	39
Writing an Op-Ed or Commentary	43

SECTION 01:

Introduction to the Recess Policy Toolkit

Background Information

Physical inactivity is a major contributing factor to chronic disease in the U.S.¹ Regular physical activity offers numerous benefits for children, supporting not only physical health but also academic performance and mental and emotional well-being.²⁻⁴ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that children between the ages of 6-17 get at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day.⁵ Given that children spend a substantial portion of their weekdays in school, schools have a vital role in ensuring this recommendation is met.

“Play” often involves physical activity, however not all physical activity is play. Physical activity can be structured and goal-oriented, whereas play is typically unstructured and driven by motivation and fun. For children, active play is a primary way to achieve physical activity goals. Play is essential to children’s healthy development and promotes positive mental health. Benefits of play include improvements in executive functioning, language, early math skills (numerosity and spatial concepts), social development, peer relations, physical development and health, and an enhanced sense of agency, in addition to lower levels of stress.⁶

Children today have less access to play than previous generations. On average, children’s time in school and on homework total to more than 50 hours per week, making academic expectations more rigorous than the 40-hour work week.⁷ At the same time, children’s mental health has declined. Some have posited that a primary cause of the rise in mental health disorders among children is a decline in opportunities for play.⁷

One of the most effective strategies for the promotion of physical activity, play, and the associated benefits for school-aged children and adolescents is **daily recess**— a regularly scheduled period in the school day for physical activity and play, monitored by trained staff or volunteers.⁸ Recess supports children’s physical health while also promoting mental wellness, social development, and cognitive function. Recess, which provides intentional opportunities for unstructured breaks during the school day, is associated with greater activity and lower sedentary time, and may decrease the risk of obesity and obesity-related health conditions.⁹ In addition to physical health benefits of recess, there is extensive evidence that recess, specifically, has mental health, behavioral, and academic benefits for youth.^{10,11} Recess is an important time for socialization and peer interaction, allowing the development of essential social skills.¹² Though much of the focus on recess has been on elementary schools, there is emerging evidence that recess is beneficial to adolescents as well.¹³ Given that 84% of school-age children in the U.S. attend public school, recess offers an unmatched opportunity to use existing systems to improve the health of our nation’s children.

To ensure children have access to daily recess, an effective approach is to have a **state-level recess law** in place. Codifying recess into state law is important, as children living in states with recess laws have significantly greater odds of being physically active every day.¹⁴ Ensuring that all elementary and middle school students have access to recess is a necessity to support healthy children.¹⁵ To support the development, passage, and implementation of strong state-level recess laws, we have developed this toolkit for advancing recess in schools through state laws.

Approach to Developing This Recess Policy Toolkit

Our project team is led by Erin Hager, PhD, Professor, and Rachel Deitch, MS, Program Officer, both in the Department of Population, Family and Reproductive Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, specifically Kerri Lowerey, MPH, JD. Once funding was secured, our team invited researchers, practitioners, and stakeholder to form an advisory board. Organizations involved in the advisory board are listed in the table below. Over the course of one year (November 2024–November 2025), members attended three virtual meetings and provided iterative feedback on best practices and policy toolkit components as they were developed and refined.

ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN ADVISORY BOARD
AFT
Arizona Department of Education
East Hartford Public Schools
Free State PTA
Maryland Advisory Council on Health and Physical Education
National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
The School Superintendents Association (AASA)
National Association of School Nursing (NASN)
National Cancer Institute, Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences, Behavioral Research Program, Health Behaviors Research Branch
SHAPE America (Society of Health and Physical Educators)
SHAPE Maryland
Special Olympics International
University of California Nutrition Policy Institute
University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law
Utah State University

At the first meeting, we discussed the goals of the project, recent research and legislation, and discussed additional advisory board members to invite to join the project. It was noted that the youth voice was not included in the advisory board. With that, we sought additional funding to conduct focus groups with youth and other school-level stakeholders to understand their perspectives on state recess laws. This work was done in Maryland; however, the focus group guides are included in this toolkit for others to incorporate youth and stakeholder voices into their state-level advocacy work.

During the second advisory board meeting, we met with Josh Newman, a U.S. State Senator, California, to learn more about his work in passing a recess law. We also heard from Tracy Steffano, an advocate from Connecticut (K-12 Supervisor for Health and Physical Education), who spoke about implementing recess in middle schools in East Hartford Public Schools. Project leadership led a structured discussion with advisory board members, asking questions throughout. From this discussion, information on advocacy supports, legislator concerns, and approaches to getting a recess law passed were incorporated in the toolkit components.



Our team then hosted a promoted content session at the SHAPE America National Convention titled “Requesting Feedback: Toolkit to Promote State-Level Recess Policies”. The session included a brief overview of the draft recess law best practices followed by a policy-to-action activity. Participants included states with and without recess laws. We heard about attempts to pass recess laws that failed, along with barriers and supports for implementation once a law was in place. We used the information garnered from this session throughout this toolkit.

We also met with leaders from local and state coalitions to identify steps to forming a coalition, as well as key considerations when advocating for new or enhanced legislation. Information gathered from these conversations, in addition to input from the advisory board regarding coalitions, has also been incorporated throughout this toolkit.

Over the next several months, the project team developed draft toolkit components, which were sent to the advisory board in two waves. Advisory board members provided detailed feedback on documents. Feedback was then incorporated into near-final drafts. The advisory board then met one last time to review remaining questions and to discuss dissemination and next steps.

Rationale for Best Practices to Include in State Law

The policy toolkit emphasizes integrating evidence-based best practices into law. These practices were developed based on current literature and input from the advisory board.

The **best practices** incorporated throughout the toolkit have been split into two groups:

- *Essential*- key components of a strong recess law
- *Enhanced*- components that would improve the comprehensiveness and impact of a recess law

There are five essential best practices and 10 enhanced, lettered from A-O. Below we present a brief summary of the evidence supporting the inclusion of these practices in this toolkit.

FIVE ESSENTIAL BEST PRACTICES

- *(A) The law mandates a time requirement of at least 20 minutes of daily recess.*

This ensures that the law is timebound, which is essential for implementation, and includes the minimum time limit recommended jointly by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and SHAPE America (Society for Health and Physical Educators).¹⁶ These agencies recommend a minimum of 20 minutes of recess for elementary students, daily, in addition to a specified period of daily physical activity for middle and high school students.

- *(B) The law is inclusive of all students in grades kindergarten-8.*

Once students transition to middle school, they are significantly less likely to have recess compared to their elementary school counterparts,¹⁷ yet the national recommendation of 60 minutes of daily physical activity remains unchanged as children enter adolescence. National and international agencies have emphasized the need for recess for all students, through adolescence, including the Global Recess Alliance¹⁸ and the American Academy of Pediatrics.¹⁹ In addition, through a joint statement by the US Play Coalition in collaboration with the American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA/USA) and the Alliance for Childhood, the groups recommended 20-40 minutes of recess daily from elementary school through high school.²⁰ Finally, given the current state of adolescent mental health in the U.S., health professionals within these groups have noted the potential benefits of recess to specifically address adolescent wellbeing.¹⁸

- *(C) The law prohibits schools from withholding recess for any reason, including as a form of punishment or to complete academic work, except when a student's participation in recess poses an immediate threat to the safety of the student or others*

Each of the agencies listed above also note the importance of ensuring that recess is not withheld as a punishment.^{16,18-20} In a recent article by Massey et al, it is noted that removing recess amplifies, rather than corrects behavioral challenges.²¹ When recess is withheld for poor behavior or academic performance, students experience reduced physical activity and increased sedentary behavior,²² and this practice may contribute to poor social experiences and mental health in students for whom recess is withheld, as it deprives students of opportunities for social interaction and physical activity.²³ Moreover, the practice of withholding recess as a punishment is more prevalent in schools with a lower socioeconomic make up, compared to higher,²⁴ and more common among Black students compared to White students.²⁵ Given this, our advisory board felt that this was an essential part of a state law.

- *(D) The law prohibits schools from using recess to fulfil state mandated physical education requirements.*

Physical education and recess are not the same and should not be considered interchangeable. According to SHAPE America, physical education is “an academic subject that provides students in kindergarten through 12th grade with structured instruction aimed at developing motor skills, knowledge, and behaviors”.²⁶ While both physical education and recess offer opportunities for physical activity, the two serve different purposes. Physical education is structured, curriculum-based and led by an instructor, whereas recess should be unstructured, student-directed, and centered on free play and social interaction. Just as time spent in math or science class is separate from other academic subjects, physical education time must remain entirely separate from recess to ensure students receive unique benefits of both. This distinction is important to maximize the benefits of play during recess, described above, and therefore should be included in a state law.

- *(E) The law includes specific language on compliance (i.e. monitoring and/or enforcement).*

Including a plan for monitoring and enforcing a state law, within school districts and schools, is essential to ensure implementation as intended.

Enhanced Best Practices

There are 10 enhanced best practices that should be considered when developing a state recess law. Many of these are aligned with the Global Recess Alliance's recommendations to ensure that students have a high-quality recess experience, with little variability across schools. They note that common challenges include:¹⁸

- Lack of, or unsafe, equipment and space
- Insufficient or overly restrictive supervision
- Weather or environmental constraints (e.g., extreme heat, extreme UV, poor air quality)
- Exclusionary practices or policies
- Boredom and social conflict.

These and other practices can be addressed in state law and should be considered to enhance a law that includes the five essential best practices outlined above.

TEN ENHANCED BEST PRACTICES

- *(F) The law states that transition time may not be counted toward the required recess minimum.*

Transition time may include time spent walking to and from the recess location, lining up or preparing to re-enter the classroom, dressing or undressing for weather conditions, or receiving behavior-related instructions or disciplines that interrupt the opportunity for unstructured play. By ensuring that transition time is not included in the designated recess time, students are more likely to reach the recess time required in the law.

- *(G) The law requires that recess be provided on shortened school days.*

Incorporating details on how schools should address recess on scheduled half days or unscheduled delayed entry days (i.e. snow days) allows for uniformity across schools and ensures that students have time for play every school day.

- *(H) The law requires recess to be inclusive for all students, including those with disabilities.*

Specifically addressing how this law is inclusive for all students is another enhancement to a recess law, with an emphasis on inclusivity for students with disabilities.

The next three enhanced best practices **(I through K)** include language for laws around recess practices, including prioritizing outdoor recess, ensuring opportunities for active play for indoor recess, and use of personal electronic devices during recess/play time

- *(I) The law requires that recess is held outdoors when possible.*
- *(J) If recess must be held indoors due to weather, safety, or other factors, the law states that schools must provide adequate space for students to be physically active*
- *(K) The law prohibits the use of personal electronic devices during recess. School approved screen-time that promotes physical activity (e.g., Go Noodle) is allowed when recess must be held indoors.*
- *(L) The law requires schools to provide annual professional development opportunities for staff members who lead or supervise recess.*

This enhancement address several of the barriers to quality noted by the Global Recess Alliance, including insufficient or overly restrictive supervision, exclusionary practices or policies, and boredom and social conflict among students,¹⁸ in addition to prioritizing student safety. This is also a recommendation specified by the CDC and SHAPE America.¹⁶

- *(M) The law requires schools to schedule recess before lunch.*

This was included given the evidence regarding the impact of recess before lunch on reducing food waste, increasing consumption, improving the lunchtime environment, and improving overall student behavior and classroom concentration.²⁷⁻²⁹ This approach is also recommended by the CDC and SHAPE America¹⁶ and through a joint statement by the US Play Coalition in collaboration with the American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA/USA) and the Alliance for Childhood.²⁰

Finally, again prioritizing student safety during recess, a priority for the CDC and SHAPE America,¹⁶ two additional enhanced best practices have been included:

- *(N) The law requires schools to provide age-appropriate equipment-whether structured (e.g., playgrounds) or student-initiated (e.g., balls)*
- *(O) The law requires all recess equipment and facilities to meet or exceed safety standards.*

What is in the Policy Toolkit?

Resources listed below are included to help advocates, stakeholders, and other interested groups to support the development and passage of strong recess laws. Resources include the following:

- A **recess policy scorecard** for use among states with recess laws in place or to use when developing a recess law. This scorecard utilizes the essential and enhanced best practices described above.
- A high-level **summary of legal research** conducted by our team on recess laws (or physical activity laws that may include recess) in place throughout the U.S (50 states + District of Columbia)
- **State profiles** for each of the 25 states and the District of Columbia with a recess or physical activity law in place. For each, we cite the name of the law and extract language from the law that aligns with scorecard components. Finally, we apply the scorecard to each state law.
- **Model recess legislation** that incorporates all of the essential and enhanced best practices described above. This is a “best case scenario” law.
- A list of **implementation challenges and solutions** based on real world examples. This list can be used as new legislation is developed or as a new recess law is implemented.
- Detailed information on **how to build a coalition** to introduce recess laws. This information may be used by community groups or other advocates to begin the process of developing a state recess law.
- **Key stakeholder questions**, in the style of focus group guides for students, teachers, and administrators. As a coalition is building, it is often helpful to get information and perspectives from key stakeholders on the need for a policy or what components should be included.
- Finally, information on **how to write an op-ed** for a local news outlet in support of a recess law is also included. Op-eds can be a useful tool for drawing attention to the need for a policy or drawing support for legislation that is being proposed or debated.

Dissemination

The toolkit can be downloaded by section or in its entirety through the Bloomberg American Health Initiative website (americanhealth.jhu.edu).

SECTION 02:

Recess Policy Score Card

**Audience**

This score card can be used by advocates and/or policy makers at the state, district, or school level.

Purpose

To assess the strength of a recess law based on recess best practices.

Application

This scorecard is designed to assess each best practice individually and is not intended to generate a total or cumulative score. A score of “2” indicates that the best practice is strongly reflected in the recess law. A score of “1” highlights opportunities to strengthen the law in that area.

This scorecard was created by the research team, with input from the advisory board, to provide a starting point for advocates and policymakers seeking to improve recess legislation. A score of “0” indicates that the law requires development in that area. We recommend first incorporating all essential best practices, followed by any enhanced best practices that are appropriate for your state.

ESSENTIAL BEST PRACTICES

A. The law mandates a time requirement of at least 20 minutes of daily recess

0	Not mentioned
1	<p>Vague and/or suggested OR requires less than 20 minutes/day of recess OR law is inclusive of recess, however other physical activity-specific practices are also noted to meet time requirements (in other words, there is a “physical activity” law and not a “recess” law).</p> <p>Examples:</p> <p>(1) Each local and regional board of education shall require each school under its jurisdiction to include in the regular school day for each student devoted to recess of <u>not less than 15 minutes in total</u>.</p> <p>(2) It shall <u>be the goal</u> of all schools to provide recess of at least 20 minutes per day.</p> <p>(3) The <u>time provided for physical activity may include</u> physical education classes and opportunities for unstructured physical activity, such as recess.</p>
2	<p>Required</p> <p>Examples:</p> <p>(1) Recess <u>must be at least 20 minutes</u> on regular instructional days and at least 15 minutes on early release days and may be provided in one or more periods.</p> <p>(2) For any school day five clock hours or longer in length, the total time allotted for play for students <u>must be at least 20 minutes</u>.</p>

B. The law is inclusive of all students in grades kindergarten-8

0	Not mentioned
1	<p>Vague and/or suggested OR only covers elementary school</p> <p>Example: For students in grades kindergarten through 5, schools must provide daily recess. It <u>should be the goal</u> of all schools <u>to provide daily recess for students in grades 6-8</u>.</p>
2	<p>Required</p> <p>Example: All public schools <u>must provide</u> daily time for recess for <u>all students in grades kindergarten through 8</u>.</p>

C. The law prohibits schools from withholding recess for any reason, including as a form of punishment or to complete academic work, except when a student’s participation in recess poses an immediate threat to the safety of the student or others.

0	Allowed or not mentioned
1	<p>Vague and/or suggested</p> <p>Example: Teachers <u>shall make a good-faith effort</u> to not withhold recess for punitive reasons.</p>
2	<p>Prohibited</p> <p>Example: All public schools are <u>prohibited from withholding recess as a disciplinary or punitive action</u>, except when a student’s participation in recess poses an immediate threat to the safety of the student or others.</p>

ESSENTIAL BEST PRACTICES

D. The law prohibits schools from using recess to fulfil state mandated physical education requirements

0	<p>Allowed or not mentioned</p> <p>Example: <u>Recess shall not be required</u> on any school day on which a student has had physical education or structured activity time.</p>
1	<p>Vague and/or suggested</p> <p>Example: Recess <u>should be</u> in addition to the physical education requirements.</p>
2	<p>Prohibited</p> <p>Example: Recess <u>must not count as a course of physical education</u> that fulfills the requirements of [State Physical Education Requirement], nor shall time spent in a course of physical education count towards the daily time for recess.</p>

E. The law includes specific language on compliance (i.e. monitoring and/or enforcement).

0	Not mentioned
1	<p>Vague and/or suggested</p> <p>Example: Schools <u>are encouraged to adhere</u> to the recess requirements outlined in this law. It is recommended that schools monitor recess practices and participation, adjusting as necessary to ensure compliance with the law.</p>
2	<p>Included with strong language</p> <p>Example: The <u>Office of Teaching and Learning is authorized to oversee school implementation and compliance with this law</u> and, in doing so, shall:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Provide technical assistance and support to schools with implementation of the law and improve programming functions; Ensure schools are offered support services through various Central Office departments and Network offices; Establish a credential process for outside partners and community agencies to support schools; Establish a process to gather regular reporting and feedback from individual schools, community partners, students and parents on the implementation of the law; Conduct periodic evaluations and upon request report on district-wide and individual schools' compliance with the law to the Board; Establish a process for assessing the equity impact of this law, including how the law is implemented in relation to who is most impacted by inequity to determine targeted universalist support for schools.

ENHANCED BEST PRACTICES

F. The law states that transition time may not be counted toward the required recess minimum.

Examples to include are:

- a. Transitions or passing time to and from the recess location
- b. Time spent lining up or preparing to re-enter the classroom
- c. Time spent dressing or undressing for weather conditions
- d. Time spent receiving behavior-related instructions or disciplines that interrupt the opportunity for unstructured play.

0	Not mentioned
1	Vague and/or suggested Example: Teachers shall make an effort to preserve recess time so that transitions to and from the designated space do not substantially reduce opportunities for student play.
2	Required Example: Time spent dressing or undressing for outdoor play time <u>shall not count towards the daily time for play.</u>

Note: Scoring is based on the inclusion of any mention of transition time.

G. The law requires that recess be provided on shortened school days.

0	Not mentioned
1	Vague and/or suggested Example: For each school day that exceeds five hours in duration, schools must provide a minimum of 30 minutes of daily recess for all students. If the school day is less than five hours in duration, schools shall <u>make an effort to provide a minimum of 15 minutes of recess for all students.</u>
2	Required Example: Recess <u>shall be</u> at least 30 minutes on regular instructional days and <u>at least 15 minutes on early release days</u> and may be provided in one or more periods

Note: Scoring for this item does not include language for half-day Kindergarten.

H. The law requires recess to be inclusive for all students, including those with disabilities.

0	Allowed or not mentioned
1	Vague and/or suggested Example: Schools <u>should consider the inclusion of recess in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans</u> for students with disabilities when appropriate. Schools are encouraged to provide accommodations that support student participation in recess.
2	Required Example: Schools <u>must ensure that recess is included in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan</u> for any student whose disability affects their ability to participate in recess. Needed supports, modifications, and accommodations should be documented to ensure equitable access to recess, in alignment with the student's rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Schools must provide appropriate staff training to implement these accommodations effectively.

ENHANCED BEST PRACTICES

I. The law requires that recess is held outdoors when possible.

0	Not mentioned
1	Vague and/or suggested Example: Schools <u>are encouraged to provide recess outdoors, but it may be held indoors.</u>
2	Required Example: Recess <u>must be held outdoors whenever weather conditions and safety standards permit.</u> If recess must be held indoors due to adverse weather or other factors, schools are required to provide a suitable indoor space where students can engage in physical activity.

J. If recess must be held indoors due to weather, safety, or other factors, the law states that schools must provide adequate space for students to be physically active.

0	Not mentioned
1	Vague and/or suggested Example: If recess is held indoors, schools are <u>encouraged to provide it in a space that promotes physical activity.</u>
2	Required Example: If recess must be held indoors due to adverse weather or other factors, <u>schools are required to provide a suitable indoor space where students can engage in physical activity.</u>

K. The law prohibits the use of personal electronic devices during recess. School approved screen-time that promotes physical activity (e.g., Go Noodle) is allowed when recess must be held indoors.

0	Not mentioned
1	Vague and/or suggested Example: Recess may include organized games, but schools <u>should avoid including, or permitting the student use of, computers, tablets or phones during recess.</u>
2	Required Example: Play time must allow unstructured play, and may include organized games, but <u>shall not include the use of computers, tablets, phones or videos.</u>

L. The law requires schools to provide annual professional development opportunities for staff members who lead or supervise recess that promotes physical activity (e.g., Go Noodle) is allowed when recess must be held indoors.

0	Not mentioned
1	Vague and/or suggested Example: <u>Schools are encouraged to offer professional development opportunities</u> related to recess supervision and best practices for staff members who oversee student play.
2	Required Example: All school staff members responsible for leading or supervising recess <u>must participate in annual professional development training</u> focused on effective recess supervision, student engagement strategies, student safety, conflict resolution, etc.

ENHANCED BEST PRACTICES

M. The law requires schools to schedule recess before lunch

0	Not mentioned
1	Suggested and/or encouraged Example: <u>Recess before lunch is recommended</u> but is left to the discretion of the school district.
2	Required Example: <u>Schools are required to schedule recess before lunch</u> to promote student well-being and encourage healthier eating habits.

N. The law requires schools to provide age-appropriate equipment-whether structured (e.g., playgrounds) or student-initiated (e.g., balls).

0	Not mentioned
1	Vague and/or suggested Example: Schools should <u>strive to provide safe, age-appropriate equipment for recess.</u>
2	Required Example: Schools <u>must ensure that age-appropriate equipment is available</u> to students during recess.

O. The law requires all recess equipment and facilities to meet or exceed safety standards.

0	Not mentioned
1	Vague and/or suggested Example: It is <u>recommended</u> that schools periodically assess playgrounds, gymnasiums, and other activity spaces to <u>ensure they adhere to general safety standards.</u>
2	Required Facilities for recess <u>must meet or exceed recognized safety standards.</u> Schools are required to conduct regular safety inspections and maintenance of playgrounds, gymnasiums, and other recreational areas where recess occurs.

SECTION 03:

Legal Research Summary on State Recess Laws

Below is a summary of the laws (statutes or administrative regulations) relating to recess that have passed in 25 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (as of October 2025), for a total of 26 laws. We first provide a high-level summary and then include two data tables to summarize policy language relevant to (1) the five essential best practices and (2) the 10 enhanced best practices, as aligned with our Score Card (Section 2). Recall that the score card includes a scoring system wherein a law receives a score of “2” if the language is strong, a “1” if the language is weak, and a “0” if the language is not included or there is language specifically in opposition of the best practice. In Section 4, we have created 26 “state profiles” for each law

High-level summary of the 26 laws relating to recess in the U.S.:

- **Type of law/regulation:**
 - 11 are recess statutes
 - 2 are recess regulations
 - 10 are physical activity statutes that may include recess
 - 2 are physical activity regulations that may include recess
 - 1 is a recess detention law
- **Essential best practices within laws:**
 - 10 use strong language to mandate at least 20 minutes of recess daily
 - Of these, five exceed this best practice by specifying 30 or 40 minutes of recess per day
 - Although six include middle school students, only two use strong language to specify the inclusion of all students in K-8, however both are broad physical activity laws (not recess laws)
 - Seven use strong language to specify that recess may not be withheld as a punishment
 - 12 use strong language to ensure that recess may not fulfill physical education requirements
 - On the contrary, six include language to *allow* for overlap in recess/physical education time
 - Three use strong language related to compliance
- **Enhanced best practices within laws:**
 - Two include strong language to ensure transition time does not count toward recess
 - Two include strong language to require recess on shortened school days
 - Two have strong language to ensure recess is inclusive for all students, including those with disabilities
 - Four specify, using strong language, that recess must be held outdoors when possible
 - Two include strong language to ensure adequate space for activity during indoor recess
 - Three have strong language prohibiting the use of personal electronic devices during recess
 - Three include strong language for Professional Development for those overseeing recess
 - None require recess before lunch
 - One uses strong language for including age-appropriate equipment
 - None make note of recess equipment or facilities meeting safety standards

Summary: Essential Best Practices


State	Type of Law	A. Mandates a time requirement of at least 20 minutes of daily recess		B. Inclusive of all students in grades kindergarten-8		C. Prohibits withholding recess		D. Prohibits schools from using recess to fulfil state mandated physical education requirements		E. Includes language on compliance
	Recess or Physical Activity (PA)	Score Assigned (0=none, 1=weak, 2=strong)	Time Specified	Score Assigned (0=none, 1=weak, 2=strong)	Grade Levels Specified	Score Assigned (0=none or allowed, 1=weak, 2=strong)	Can schools withhold recess?	Score Assigned (0=none or allowed, 1=weak, 2=strong)	Is recess allowed to count toward PE requirements?	Score Assigned (0=none, 1=weak, 2=strong)
AK	PA	1	90% of recommended PA (90% of 60 minutes = 54 minutes/day)	1	K-8	0	Not mentioned	0	Time can be for PE or recess	0
AZ	Recess	1	2 periods per day	1	K-5	0	Not mentioned	1	Allows 1 recess period to count as PE	0
AR	Recess	2	40 minutes/day	1	K-4, may include 5-6	0	Not mentioned	2	Not allowed	0
CA	Recess	2	30 minutes/day	1	K-6	2	Not allowed	2	Not allowed	0
CO	PA	1	600 minutes per month	1	Elem	0	Not mentioned	2	Not allowed	1
CT	PA	2	20 minutes/day	1	Elem	2	Allowed, but guarantees 20 min/day	0	Not mentioned	0
DC	Recess	1	20 minutes/day	1	K-8	1	Unclear if law refers to PE or recess	0	Not mentioned	0
FL	Recess	2	20 minutes/day	1	K-5	0	Not mentioned	2	Not allowed	0
GA	Recess	1	every day	1	K-5	0	Up to district	0	Recess not required on days with PE	1
IL	Recess	2	30 minutes/day	1	K-5	2	Not allowed	2	Not allowed	0
IN	PA	1	every day	1	Elem	0	Not mentioned	0	Not mentioned	0
KY	PA	1	every day, cannot exceed 30 min/day	1	K-5	0	Not mentioned	0	Not mentioned	2
LA	Recess	1	15 minutes/day	1	K-5	0	Not mentioned	0	Not mentioned	0
MN	Recess (Detention)	0	--	0	--	2	Not allowed	0	Not mentioned	0
MO	Recess	2	20 minutes/day	1	Elem	0	Not mentioned	0	Allows extra PE in place of recess	0
NH	PA	1	30 to 60 minutes/day	1	Elem Middle High	0	Not mentioned	2	Not allowed	2
NJ	Recess	2	20 minutes/day	1	K-5	2	Not allowed	2	Not allowed	0
OK	PA	1	60 minutes/week *20 min/day is encouraged	1	K-5	0	Not mentioned	2	Not allowed	0
RI	Recess	2	20 min/day	1	K-6	1	Weak language	2	Not allowed	0
SC	PA	1	150 minutes/week (combine PE and recess)	1	K-5	0	Not mentioned	1	90 minutes must be PE, unclear about other 60 minutes	0
TN	PA	1	40 min/day (elem) 90 min/week (middle/high)	2	Elem Middle High	2	Not allowed	2	Not allowed	2
TX	PA	1	30 min/day	1	Full Day Pre-K, K-5	0	N/A	0	Time can be for PE or physical activity	0
VT	PA	1	30 min/day	1	K-12	0	Not mentioned	2	Not allowed	0
VA	PA	1	20 min/day 150 min/week	2	k-5 6-12	0	Not mentioned	0	Time can be for PE or recess	0
WA	Recess	2	30 min/day	1	K-5 and 6 th grade in elementary school	1	Weak language	2	Not allowed	0
WV	Recess	2	30 min/day	1	1-5	2	Not allowed	0	Not mentioned	0

Summary: Enhanced Practices

State	F. Transition time does not count toward minimum	G. Requires recess to be provided on shortened school days	H. Requires recess to be inclusive for all students	I. Requires recess to be held outdoors	J Requires adequate space for students to be active during indoor recess	K. Prohibits personal electronic devices during recess	L. Requires Professional Development for staff	M. Requires recess to be scheduled before lunch	N. Age-appropriate equipment	O. Equipment and facilities meet safety standards
AK	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AZ	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AR	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0
CA	0	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
CO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
DC	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
FL	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
GA	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
IL	2	2	2	1	1	2	0	0	0	0
IN	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
KY	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MN	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
NH	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
NJ	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
OK	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
RI	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SC	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
TN	2	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0
TX	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
VT	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
VA	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
WA	1	0	0	2	2	1	2	0	0	0
WV	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

SECTION 04:

State Profiles



This section includes 26 profile documents, one for each state (+ the District of Columbia), that has a law relating to recess or physical activity, as of October 2025.

Each document contains the number and name of the law and the most recent effective date.

To identify states with laws related to recess or physical activity (that may include recess), our team engaged in the following steps:

- (1) Spring 2025, two members of the team independently conducted searches in Westlaw. The search terms, developed in consultation with our legal epidemiology partner from the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, Kerri Lowrey, JD, used were:
recess OR “unstructured play” OR breaks OR “play time”) /p (school)
 - a. The resulting list of states was then compared with data from the Classification of Laws Associated with School Students (CLASS: <https://class.cancer.gov/>), which evaluates state laws requiring recess time and was last updated in 2022.
 - b. A third team member conducted an additional search to confirm that states not identified through Westlaw or CLASS had no relevant laws.
- (2) The search was updated in October 2025 to ensure inclusion of all legislation passed during the most recent session.
- (3) Once the final list of 26 laws was confirmed, three team members independently extracted data for these Profiles.
 - a. One member reviewed all 26 laws, while the other two reviewed 13 each. The data were then scored using the scorecard developed for this toolkit. The team met to review and compare scores, and any discrepancies that could not be resolved collaboratively were adjudicated by the project lead.
 - b. Prior to publication, the list of laws included was also compared with two recent resources, listed below, to ensure that the list was complete
 - i. The Sports Institute “Youth Sports And Physical Activity Legislation Tracker”
<https://thesportsinstitute.com/youth-sports-and-physical-activity-legislation-tracker/>
 - ii. Thompson HR, Lochner-Bravo U, Talebloo J, Davis JN, Falbe J. Accountability and funding for state-level school physical education and recess laws. American Journal of Preventive Medicine. 2025 Jul 31:108017.

Please note that this search of state laws may not have included adjacent laws that were not linked in the Westlaw database (for example, a state law on safety of playground or recreation equipment that includes school grounds may not have been discovered, or a regulation regarding implementation that was not linked to the law may not have been discovered). We encourage states to provide links to adjacent laws and regulations for constituents to understand the breadth of the laws in place. Finally, this search did not include local or school district policies or regulations.

This scorecard was created by the research team, with input from the advisory board, to provide a starting point for advocates and policymakers seeking to improve recess legislation. A score of “0” indicates that the law requires further development. We recommend first incorporating all essential best practices, followed by any enhanced best practices that are appropriate for your state.

Alaska has a physical activity law that may include recess to meet the minimum daily amount required.

BEST PRACTICE	LANGUAGE IN LAW	SCORE
ESSENTIAL PRACTICES		
A. Mandates a time requirement of at least 20 minutes of daily recess	<p>A school district shall establish guidelines for schools in the district to provide opportunities during each full school day for students in grades kindergarten through eight for a minimum of 90 percent of the daily amount of physical activity recommended for children and adolescents in the physical activity guidelines by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, United States Department of Health and Human Services.</p> <p>The time provided for physical activity under this subsection may include physical education classes and opportunities for unstructured physical activity, such as recess. <i>*Physical activity law and not a recess-specific law</i></p>	1
B. Inclusive of all students in grades kindergarten-8	<p>A school district shall establish guidelines for schools in the district to provide opportunities during each full school day for students in grades kindergarten through eight for a minimum of 90 percent of the daily amount of physical activity recommended for children and adolescents in the physical activity guidelines by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, United States Department of Health and Human Services.</p>	2
C. Prohibits schools from withholding recess	N/A	0
D. Prohibits schools from using recess to fulfil state mandated physical education requirements	<p>The time provided for physical activity under this subsection may include physical education classes and opportunities for unstructured physical activity, such as recess. <i>*Time can be PE or recess</i></p>	0
E. Includes specific language on compliance	N/A	0

BEST PRACTICE	LANGUAGE IN LAW	SCORE
ENHANCED PRACTICES		
F. Transition time does not count toward minimum time	N/A	0
G. Requires recess be provided on shortened school days	N/A	0
H. Requires recess to be inclusive for all students	N/A	0
I. Requires recess to be held outdoors	N/A	0
J. If recess is indoors, the law requires there to be adequate space for students to be physically active	N/A	0
K. Prohibits the use of personal electronic devices during recess	N/A	0
L. Requires schools to provide annual professional development opportunities for staff members who lead or supervise recess	N/A	0
M. Requires schools to schedule recess before lunch	N/A	0
N. Requires schools to provide age-appropriate equipment	N/A	0
O. Requires all recess equipment and facilities to meet or exceed safety standards	N/A	0

SECTION 05:

Model Recess Legislation

Key Considerations When Drafting a State Recess Law

This section provides language for drafting a law: a statute or regulation that would require some kind of action around providing recess, whether that action is voluntary or mandatory. There are legitimate reasons that jurisdictions may prefer an informal (noncodified) approach. These reasons may include cost concerns, political palatability, and infrastructure or personnel readiness. See the Frequently Asked Questions section for considerations on a non-legislative approach.

Clearly Define Recess

Ensure the policy includes a clear definition of recess. Choose language that reflects the intent of your policy and supports the kind of recess you aim to promote.

The CDC, SHAPE America, and the National Academy of Medicine define recess as “a regularly scheduled period within the school day for physical activity and play that is monitored by trained staff or volunteers”^{1,2} Examples of recess definitions from existing state laws include:

- “Supervised, safe, and unstructured free play”
- “Supervised, unstructured social time during which public school students may communicate with each other”
- “Supervised recess where supervisory staff encourage moderate to vigorous physical activity”

Include all Essential Best Practices

This toolkit prioritizes five essential best practices to maximize the effectiveness of a law:

- (A) The law mandates a time requirement of at least 20 minutes of daily recess.
- (B) The law is inclusive of all students in grades kindergarten-8.
- (C) The law prohibits schools from withholding recess for any reason, including as a form of punishment or to complete academic work, except when a student’s participation in recess poses an immediate threat to the safety of the student or others.
- (D) The law prohibits schools from using recess to fulfil state mandated physical education requirements.

- (E) The law includes specific language on compliance (i.e. monitoring and/or enforcement).

Refer to our implementation guide for detailed recommendations on how to integrate these practices into the school day.

Use Strong, Clear Language

The wording of the policy matters. Use strong, directive terms such as *shall*, *must* or *is required* rather than the weaker alternatives like *should* or *is encouraged to*. Strong language increases the likelihood of consistent implementation.

Aim High from the Start

Include as many essential and enhanced best practices as possible in the initial draft (the 5 essential best practices are described above; an additional 10 enhanced best practices are also included in this toolkit). Policies often undergo revisions during the legislative process, and starting strong helps preserve key components, even if compromises are later required.

Specify Enforcement and Accountability Measures

Enforcement mechanisms increase policy effectiveness. Clearly outline how the policy will be monitored, what documentation schools are expected to maintain, and how compliance will be assessed. We recommend emphasizing positive reinforcement, such as recognition or incentives for compliant schools, rather than punitive measures for those that fall short.

Example Legislation

This is an example of legislation that states can adopt or adapt. It incorporates all essential and enhanced best practices to strengthen implementation and impact.

BILL NUMBER: [To be assigned]

SESSION: 202X Regular Session

TITLE: Education – Recess Requirement – Kindergarten Through Grade 8

SPONSORS: [Insert sponsor names]

Effective Date: [Date the law would become effective]

Definitions

For the purposes of this Act, the following definitions apply:

- (a) Recess is defined as a regularly scheduled period within the school day for physical activity and play that is monitored by trained staff or volunteers
- (b) “Public elementary school” means a school that is operated by a school district or county office of education, or a charter school that maintains pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, or any of grades 1 to 6, inclusive.
- (c) “Public middle school” means a school that is operated by a school district or county office of education, or a charter school that maintains any of grades 6 to 8, inclusive.
 - a. For a school that maintains a grade of higher than grade 8, the provisions of this section apply only to recess provided to students in grades 6 to 8, inclusive.

-OR-

These definitions should conform with the existing definitions in state law.

Commencing with the 202X-202X school year, all of the following shall apply to recess provided by a public elementary or public middle school:

- (a) Recess must be at least 20 minutes on regular instructional days and at least 10 minutes on delayed opening or early release days.
 - i. Additional recess time beyond the 20-minute minimum is strongly encouraged.
 - ii. Recess time is exclusive of transition time (e.g., lining up, putting on coats, or walking to the recess area).
- (b) A public elementary or middle school student cannot be denied recess by a member of the school’s staff unless a student’s participation in recess poses an immediate threat to the safety of the student or others.
- (c) Recess time may not be used to fulfill state mandated physical education requirements.
- (d) School districts must provide annual professional development opportunities for staff members who supervise recess.
- (e) Recess must be scheduled before lunch for all grade levels.
- (f) Age-appropriate equipment must be provided to students during recess time. All recess equipment must meet or exceed safety standards.
- (g) Recess must be inclusive of all students
- (h) Recess must be held outdoors whenever possible. If recess must be held indoors due to weather, safety, or other factors, schools must provide a suitable indoor space where students can engage in physical activity.
- (i) Students are prohibited from using personal electronic devices during recess. School approved screen-time that promotes physical activity is allowed
- (j) Schools must adhere to the recess requirements set forth in this law/policy. Compliance will be monitored through regular reports submitted to the school district and then to the state, including documentation of recess time included in a master schedule and compliance with outlined practices. For schools found out of compliance, additional training requirements or other interventions as determined by the district will be required.
- (k) The State Department of Health and the State Department of Education shall jointly assess the effect of the law at least once every five (5) years, making a report available to the Department Secretaries, the state committees for health and education, the governor’s office and the general public via the Department websites. Such a report will survey and detail
 - the number of schools currently offering recess to students ages five through thirteen years;
 - the length of such recess and how often it is provided;
 - information pertaining to the location of such recess, including whether such recess is held indoors or outdoors;
 - if schools provide a dedicated space for such recess;
 - if the school’s recess is supervised or unsupervised; and
 - what the barriers are to providing recess in accordance with these provisions.

SECTION 06:

Implementation Challenges and Solutions

The table below outlines common challenges that schools may encounter when implementing a recess law requiring the five essential and 10 enhanced best practices. These challenges are drawn from real-world examples and school-level experiences we heard from advisory board members, invited speakers at advisory board meetings, and during a session we hosted at the 2025 SHAPE America National Convention. Each challenge is paired with practical solutions designed to support successful implementation.

CHALLENGE	SOLUTION
Time management/ scheduling conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn from sample master schedules from compliant but similarly sized/resourced school districts. • Consider breaking recess into smaller timeframes if 20+ minutes isn't feasible (e.g., two 10-minute breaks). • Delegate a student "Recess Captain of the Week" to help support teachers in starting recess on time • Integrate recess into daily routines by scheduling it immediately after lunch or specials to reduce transition time. • Build in short transition buffers in the master schedule to protect the full 20-minute recess window.
Supervision and staffing shortages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage community volunteers or parent-teacher association (PTA) support to assist • Explore creative staffing options—pairing recess with paraprofessional or special area teacher coverage. • Provide teacher duty rotations that ensure equitable workload and minimize burnout. • Offer professional development for recess supervisors focused on positive play facilitation and conflict resolution.
Inconsistent implementation across grades or classrooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize and celebrate teachers/teams promoting high-quality recess (e.g., newsletters or at staff meetings). • Provide opportunities for these teachers to share strategies or ideas with colleagues
Physical space limitations (indoor and outdoor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create indoor recess kits with movement-based activities students can play in small areas • Stagger recess times or use multiple smaller play zones to avoid crowding. • Partner with nearby community spaces (e.g., parks, recreation centers, churches) for additional play areas. • Integrate low-equipment games such as Four Square, Simon Says, or yoga stretches.
Culture of withholding recess as a punishment/need the time for makeup work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide alternatives for teachers to manage behavior without withholding recess <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Implement restorative practices (versus punishment) for students who are misbehaving in class ◦ Lead a professional training session that provides examples of real-world alternatives (for example, • Support communication between educators, students, and families to create flexible timelines for makeup work so students can still participate in recess.

CHALLENGE	SOLUTION
Lack of equipment, funding in general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply for grants to procure recess equipment and supplies • Utilize community resources • Host fundraisers • Encourage imaginative play and free play stations • Work with families and school staff to create homemade equipment • Allow students to bring favorite active play materials from home (e.g., chalk, balls) • Partner with local businesses or recreation organizations for in-kind donations or sponsorships • Rotate simple “activity stations” that require little or no equipment.
Making sure recess is inclusive and high-quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a student “Recess Council” to give feedback and suggest games or improvements to make recess inclusive for all students • Train recess supervisors on inclusive practices, ensuring all abilities, identities, and interests are represented. • Offer a variety of activities to meet diverse student needs (e.g., quiet zones, creative play, and active games)
Problematic behavior during recess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporarily prohibit activities that cause recurring issues • Teach students self-calming and problem-solving strategies • Create a “reflection zone” where students can think about behavior and demonstrate readiness to rejoin play, instead of losing recess time • Establish a clear, consistent behavior plan specific to recess (e.g., “Recess Code of Conduct”). • Use peer mediators or Recess Captains to help resolve minor conflicts.
Difficult transitions from classroom to recess and back	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide incentives or recognition for positive hallway behavior • Allow brief transition time for reflection • Utilize “Recess Captains”- students who model positive behavior and encourage peers • Use brief mindfulness or stretching exercises post-recess to help students refocus. • Develop teacher-led transition routines that smoothly move students between settings.
Unstructured play time will provide stress for a generation of kids used to having everything scheduled/ arranged for them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce students to easy to pick up games and activities such as jump rope or pickleball that could lead to a lifetime of play • Offer optional “game of the week” demonstrations to build confidence in unfamiliar play activities. • Provide social-emotional learning lessons that teach teamwork, cooperation, and flexible thinking during play.
Weather-related or seasonal barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop indoor recess plans that maintain physical activity (e.g., active video games, yoga, dance routines). • Ensure access to appropriate clothing and outerwear through donation drives or school lending closets.

SECTION 07:

**Building a Coalition to
Introduce Recess Laws**

Creating a strong coalition is a crucial step in successfully introducing and passing recess laws. A coalition brings together diverse stakeholders who share a common goal, amplifying advocacy efforts and increasing influence with policymakers. It also helps pull resources together, and leverages expertise across interconnected sectors. This section outlines key steps to build an effective coalition to support recess laws.

1. Identify Potential Coalition Members

Start by identifying individuals and organizations that have a vested interest in promoting recess and children's health and development. Ensure diversity of membership to promote recess as an experience inclusive for all. Consider including:

- **Parent and family advocacy groups**
- **School administrators and educators** (teachers-especially health and physical education teachers, principals, school district representation, for example)
- **Students**
- **Child health, disability, and pediatric organizations** (local chapters of the American Academy of Pediatrics, public health departments, or disability advocacy organizations like the "Parent Alliance for Students with Exceptional Needs" who have advocated for recess for children with ADHD and/or autism, for example)
- **State and local government representatives**—there are many individuals who work in state and local government, particularly departments of health and education, who may be wonderful champions for this work. They may have advocacy restrictions with respect to the legislature, but they are likely to be able to join a coalition as an individual.
- **University or research partners who study recess, policy, and/or physical activity in schools**
- **Youth organizations and afterschool program providers**
- **Community-based nonprofits or grassroots organizations focused on child wellness and education** (local chapters of SHAPE, for example)
- **State public health associations**
- **Recreation and parks departments**
- **Local or state advocacy groups focused on education or children's health**

• Legislators and policy champions who have shown interest in child wellness

Consider who is getting left behind in existing plans, programming, and systems as you build your coalition. Sample outreach e-mails are included in the resources section accompanying this section.

2. Clarify Shared Goals and Values

Clear, shared goals will help unify the coalition and keep members motivated and focused. Bring potential coalition members together for an initial meeting to:

- Share information about the importance of recess for children's physical, social, and cognitive development
- Discuss the goal of introducing or strengthening recess legislation in the state
- Share best practices from other states with success in implementing strong recess legislation
- Identify common priorities and potential challenges
- Establish shared values and commitment to the cause

3. Define Roles and Responsibilities

A successful coalition has clear roles to distribute work efficiently. Roles may include:

- **Lead organizer or coordinator:** Oversees coalition activities and communications
- **Policy experts or legal advisors:** Provide guidance on drafting and introducing legislation
- **Community outreach leads:** Engage families, schools, and local groups to build broader support
- **Communications and media contacts:** Manage public relations, social media, and messaging
- **Legislative liaisons:** Maintain relationships with policymakers and track legislative progress

Clarifying roles early helps prevent duplication



and ensures accountability. It's also important to ensure that each member has a meaningful role that is within their ability/bandwidth. For example, if you are including students to gain their perspectives, ensure they have clear activities or actions that they can take as part of the coalition to avoid tokenizing members. In addition, some coalition members may struggle with technology or modes of communication and may need additional support to get involved.

Some resources for identifying different roles one can use within a coalition are listed below (links active as of 11/13/2025):

- The Commons Social Change Library “Engagement Pyramid: Visualise the different ways a person might get involved with your Campaign”
<https://commonslibrary.org/engagement-pyramid/>
- The Centre for Effective Altruism “The Concentric Circles model”
<https://www.centreforeffectivealtruism.org/the-concentric-circles-model>

4. Develop a Strategic Plan

Work together to create a coalition action plan, which may include:

- Timelines for key milestones such as drafting legislation, public hearings, and votes
- Outreach strategies to educate the public and legislators on the benefits of recess
- Coalition events, such as press conferences, community forums, or letter-writing campaigns
- Garnering stakeholder feedback
 - One strategy for doing this is to conduct listening sessions of focus groups. Questions that have been used in prior focus groups with key stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, and middle school students are included in Section 8 of this toolkit.
- Fundraising or resource-sharing strategies
- Plans for monitoring and responding to legislative developments

5. Maintain Communication and Engagement

Sustain momentum through regular meetings, updates, and transparent communication. Tools such as email newsletters, group chats, or virtual meetings can keep members informed and connected. Celebrate small wins to maintain enthusiasm. Consider the communication needs of your coalition members and make accommodations as needed (for example: interpreters or using plain language).

6. Leverage Coalition Strengths

Use the diversity of coalition members to reach different audiences and sectors. Leveraging these varied strengths builds a broad base of support and credibility. For example, specific to recess in schools:

- Parent groups can mobilize families for advocacy days
- Health organizations can provide evidence-based research and expert testimony
- Educators can share classroom experiences to illustrate recess needs
- Youth organizations can engage students as advocates

7. Prepare for Long-Term Advocacy

Passing recess laws may take time and persistence. A sustainable coalition can drive change beyond legislation to ensure recess benefits are realized for all children. The coalition should be prepared for:

- Building ongoing relationships with policymakers
- Responding to opposition or challenges
- Advocating for implementation and monitoring once laws are passed
- Expanding coalition membership to include new partners
- Adjusting timelines and goals- remember progress takes time. Maintaining flexibility to account for setbacks can sustain motivation among coalition members.

Resources: Sample Coalition Outreach Templates

Initial Email Invitation to Potential Members

New Message

To

Join Us in Advocating for Recess Laws to Support Children's Health

Dear [Name],

I hope this message finds you well. We are reaching out to invite [Organization Name] to join a coalition dedicated to promoting legislation that ensures daily recess for all elementary and middle school students in [State].

Recess is essential for children's physical health, social development, and academic success. Together, we can amplify our voices to encourage state policymakers to prioritize recess in state laws.







We would love to have you involved as a valued partner. Please join us for an initial meeting on [Date] at [Time] to discuss how we can work together toward this goal.

Please RSVP by [Date]. Feel free to contact me at [Phone/Email] with any questions.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to collaborating with you!

Best regards,

[Your Name]
[Your Title]
[Your Organization]



Send

Save

Cancel

Follow-Up Email After Initial Meeting

New Message

To

Thank You for Joining Our Recess Coalition – Next Steps

Dear Coalition Members,

Thank you for your participation in our recent meeting to discuss advancing recess legislation in [State]. Your insights and enthusiasm are invaluable.

As discussed, our next steps include:







- **Finalizing coalition membership and roles**
- **Developing a strategic advocacy plan**
- **Planning outreach to families, schools, and legislators**

We will be scheduling our next meeting on [Date]. Please reply with your availability and any additional ideas you wish to share.

Together, we can make recess a priority for children's well-being in [State].

Best,

[Your Name]



Send

Save

Cancel

SECTION 08:

Key Stakeholder Questions

To determine the most appropriate components to include in or add to your state’s recess law, it is essential to engage key stakeholders. These groups may include state legislators, advocacy organizations, school administrators, teachers, and students. We’ve provided a list of questions you can use in interviews, focus groups, or even podcasts- we encourage you to be creative in how you gather this valuable information.

Interview Questions for state legislators or advocacy organizations

1. Tell us about why you believe it is important to create a state law with recess mandates in [name of state].
 - a. (State Legislators): Was this something brought to you by your constituents or by outside organizations?
 - b. (Advocacy organizations): Are you working with a state legislator to draft a bill?
2. How did you decide on a minimum recess time of [number of minutes]?
3. How did you decide what grade levels to include?
4. How did you decide on the other mandates/statutes included in this bill?
5. What are the barriers you foresee with passing this bill into law?
 - a. What can be done to overcome these barriers?
6. What positive/negative feedback have you heard regarding this bill?
 - a. Has a similar bill been discussed in [name of state] previously? What was the reasoning for the bill not passing?
7. Can you tell us about the response that you have heard from school districts or school personnel?
 - a. What concerns, if any, have you heard regarding implementation in the schools?

Focus Group Questions for School Administrators

Current Recess Environment

1. Let’s start by talking about recess at your school now. [If all administrators in the focus group report not having recess, skip to New Proposed Recess Law section]
 - a. Does your school have a recess policy? (If yes) Can you tell us about it? [Probe: length of time, prohibiting withholding recess, etc.]
 - b. How are recess policy or recess related decisions made? [Probe: who is involved, what the process looks like, what factors in to the decision-making process, scheduling]
 - c. How do you enforce the policy?
 - d. Does your school have a budget to support recess? How are the funds spent? Who makes these decisions?
 - e. What facilities or equipment does your school have that students use during recess?
 - f. What does supervision of the students during recess look like?
 - g. Tell me the difference between outdoor vs. indoor recess. [Probe: how does your school decide when to stay indoors vs. going outdoors?]
2. Tell me about your thoughts on the benefits of recess for your students.
 - a. What about for your teachers and staff?
3. Now, tell me about your thoughts on the challenges of recess for your students.
 - a. What about for your teachers and staff?

New Proposed Recess Law

In this next section, we are hoping to hear your thoughts on a recess policy that Maryland legislators plan to propose at the next legislative session. If passed, this law would require elementary and middle schools in Maryland to provide 30 minutes of recess to all students every day. It would also prohibit withholding recess from students.

4. What are your thoughts on this proposed law?

We are interested in learning about how this law might affect all the people who work at or attend your school.

5. Let's start with you and the other administrative staff. Are there any ways that this law might make your jobs as administrators easier?

a. How about harder?

6. Next, let's talk about your teachers and support staff. Are there any ways that this law might make their jobs easier? Elaborate.

a. How about harder?

7. What about your students? Are there ways that this law might make a student's school day easier?

a. How about harder?

8. If your school was required to implement this policy, what support would you or your school need to do so effectively?

9. Are there any other concerns you have regarding this proposed policy?

10. What would you like policymakers to know before finalizing the law?

Future

11. How would you weigh the benefits of recess against the challenges of implementation?

12. What kind of impact do you think a law like this would have on your school in the distant future?

Focus Group Questions for Teachers

Current Recess Environment

1. Let's start by talking about what recess looks like at your school now. [If all teachers in the focus group report not having recess, skip to New Proposed Recess Law section]

a. How long is the recess period? What time of day?

b. Who is responsible for taking the students to and from recess? [Probe: supervision during recess]

c. What do most students like to do during recess? [Probe: playground, fields, equipment, etc.]

d. Tell me about any rules your school has during recess? [Probe: technology use]

e. Tell me the difference between outdoor vs. indoor recess. [Probe: how does your school decide when to stay indoors vs. going outdoors?]

2. What are the benefits that your students experience due to recess?

a. What about benefits that you or other teachers experience due to recess?

3. What are the challenges that your students experience due to recess?

a. What about challenges that you or other teachers experience due to recess?

4. Tell me about any policy your school has when it comes to withholding recess. [Probe: If there is a policy, do you and other teachers at your school enforce it?]

New Proposed Recess Law

In this next section, we are hoping to hear your thoughts on a recess policy that Maryland legislators plan to propose at the next legislative session. If passed, this law would require elementary and middle schools in Maryland to provide 30 minutes of recess to all students every day. It would also prohibit withholding recess from students.

5. What are your thoughts on this proposed law?
6. Are there any ways this law might make your job easier? Elaborate.
7. Are there any ways this law might make your job harder? [Probe: logistics, supervision, instructional time]
 - a. How do you think those challenges could be addressed?
8. How do you think this law might affect your students?
 - a. [For middle school teachers] How do you think this law might affect middle school students in general?
9. If your school needed to implement this policy, what would your school OR staff need to do so effectively?
10. Are there any other concerns you have regarding the proposed policy?
11. What would you like policymakers to know before finalizing the law?

Future

12. What kind of impact do you think a law like this would have on your school in the distant future?

Focus Group Questions for Students

Recess in Elementary School

1. Let's start by talking about recess when you were in elementary school
 - a. What did you or other students usually do at recess? [Prompt for outdoor recess and indoor recess]
 - b. Were there any rules you had to follow during recess? What were they like?
 - c. Were there any times when a teacher didn't let you or your class have recess? What happened?
2. How did having recess make you feel during the school day? [Prompt if needed: did recess affect mood, focus, energy, etc.]
3. Was there anything about recess that you didn't like or found frustrating? [Prompt if needed: rules, equipment, games, fairness, etc.]

Recess in Middle School

Now, let's talk about this past school year.

4. This past year in 6th grade, did your class ever get recess or free time during the school day? [If yes]: What was that like? How often did it happen?
5. It sounds like most of you did not have recess often-or at all- this past school year. What are your thoughts on this?
 - a. How does not having recess-or having less recess-make you feel during the school day?
6. Why do you think middle school students don't get recess? [Prompt if needed: time, rules, different expectations, etc.]

Thoughts on a New Recess Law

There's an idea for a new law that would give middle school students at least 20 minutes of recess every day.

7. What do you think about that idea?
8. If your school gave you 30 minutes of recess every day, how might it make your school day easier? [Prompt if needed: would it affect your mood, energy, friendships, schoolwork, etc.?
9. How might having 30 minutes of recess every day make your school day harder?
10. What are some things you would want to be able to do during recess in middle school?
11. Are there people you can think of who might be against the idea of recess for middle school students? Why do you think this is?
12. What would you want decision makers- like principals or lawmakers- to know about recess for students your age?

SECTION 09:

Writing an Op-Ed or Commentary

The purpose of an op-ed, which is short for “opposite the editorial page”, is for someone with either personal experience or expertise on a topic (ideally, someone with a vested local interest), to provide a persuasive opinion related to their area of expertise. In this case, one could write an op-ed in support of enacting a new recess law in their state or advocate for improvements to an existing recess law. Below, we share some tips and resources for writing and publishing an op-ed in a local news outlet in your state.

Content

- Op-eds are short (~600-800 words) and are typically authored by just one person (sometimes two)
- Op-eds should be written in plain language, avoiding jargon, with brief, concise sentences
- Essential elements of an op-ed include:
 - A “hook” to grab your reader and make your piece timely
 - A clear, to the point, argument or thesis
 - Key points (usually ~3 pieces of data or evidence) to support your argument
 - A statement acknowledging the counter argument
 - A clear call to action at the conclusion, often circling back to your news hook

Timing

Regarding state-level recess laws, op-eds are a strategy that can be used at any time to promote the importance of state-level recess laws. For coalitions planning to promote the passage of a specific law, op-eds can play an additional role during several different periods:

- Prior to the introduction of a bill: to call attention to the lack of an existing law or a weak law
- After a bill has been introduced within your state’s legislative session: to call for support for the bill or modifications that may be needed
- After the passage of a law: to thank lawmakers and call for the new law to be well implemented
- After the passage of a law: to encourage strong implementation of/compliance with that law
- After the failure of an introduced bill to be signed into law: to call attention to the failure and for the bill to be revisited in the future

When writing an op-ed, consider the potential unintended consequences of your argument or call to action, particularly as it aligns with the timing of the publication.

Submission

Local news outlets typically have online portals for op-ed submissions. Follow the directions in the portal; these may be very prescriptive, so you may not be able to include many of the tips below. If you are able to e-mail or contact an editor directly, it may increase the likelihood of publication.

The following are general tips of what to say when contacting an editor. Most importantly, be respectful. Email once, upon submission, and follow-up one to two business days later if you do not hear back indicating that you are planning to submit elsewhere if they are not interested. If you do not hear back or are rejected, then move on to a new outlet. **Do not submit to multiple outlets at once.**

- Introduce yourself, including your expertise and local relevance (e.g.: “I am an elementary school principal and have worked for X school district in X state for 20 years; I have seen firsthand the positive benefits of recess for children”).
- Briefly summarize the argument you make in your op-ed and why it is unique (1-2 sentences).
- Note why this outlet should publish this op-ed (regional relevance, recent relevant publications, etc.)

Your organization may have media liaisons or internal resources for op-ed submissions- these entities are often very helpful in supporting your submission and providing feedback. Anyone can submit an op-ed, as a local expert/citizen, so don't worry if you are not affiliated with an organization that has media support.

General Tips

- Society for Behavioral Medicine “Top Sheet: Purpose of an Op-Ed”
<https://www.sbm.org/scicomm/guide-to-ops-eds/purpose-of-an-op-ed>
- Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; Learner Center for Public Health Advocacy “How to write an Op-ed or Letter to the Editor”
<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/learner-center/resources/how-to-write-an-op-ed-or-letter-to-the-editor>
- The Op Ed Project
<https://www.theopedproject.org/resources>
- The commons: Social Change Library “The Power of Story- The Story of Self, Us and Now”: General information on using story telling in organizing
<https://commonslibrary.org/the-power-of-story-the-story-of-self-us-and-now/>

Free Op-Ed Training

- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Healthy Eating Research op-ed training for researchers (free):
<https://healthyeatingresearch.org/2023/09/writing-effective-op-eds-a-training-for-researchers/>
- Your school district, union, university affiliate (including as alumni), or other collaborating organization may also be able to provide training free of charge.

Examples

1. Op Ed in support of the Washington State recess law
“Recess is a critical part of a child’s education”
By: Jennifer Dunne and Matt Wood (educators)
Published in the Seattle Times on March 5, 2023
<https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/recess-is-a-critical-part-of-a-childs-education/>
2. Op Ed calling for a state recess law in Michigan:
“Labor Voices: Students need recess for academic, emotional and physical wellness”
By Chandra Madaffer
Published in The Detroit News on April 1, 2025
<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/opinion/columnists/labor-voices/2025/04/01/labor-voices-students-need-recess-for-academic-emotional-and-physical-wellness/82758872007/>
3. Op Ed in support of the California State recess law going further
“Our students need more recess”
By: Timothy Walker (educator)
Published in the Desert Sun on April 5, 2024
<https://www.desertsun.com/story/opinion/2024/04/05/why-students-need-more-recess/73205370007/>
4. Commentary published after the passage of the state-wide recess law in California:
“Let’s ensure ‘Recess for All’ law really does apply to all”
By: Rebecca London and Hannah Thompson
Published in EdSource on August 27, 2024
<https://edsource.org/2024/lets-ensure-recess-for-all-law-really-does-apply-to-all/718097>

References

- ¹ Katzmarzyk PT, Friedenreich C, Shiroma EJ, Lee I-M. Physical inactivity and non-communicable disease burden in low-income, middle-income and high-income countries. *British journal of sports medicine*. 2022;56(2):101–106.
- ² Hillman CH, Logan NE, Shigeta TT. A review of acute physical activity effects on brain and cognition in children. *Translational Journal of the American College of Sports Medicine*. 2019;4(17):132–136.
- ³ Poitras VJ, Gray CE, Borghese MM, et al. Systematic review of the relationships between objectively measured physical activity and health indicators in school-aged children and youth. *Appl Physiol Nutr Metab*. 2016;41(6 Suppl 3):S197–239.
- ⁴ Sampasa-Kanyinga H, Colman I, Goldfield GS, et al. Combinations of physical activity, sedentary time, and sleep duration and their associations with depressive symptoms and other mental health problems in children and adolescents: a systematic review. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*. 2020;17:1–16.
- ⁵ Olson RD, Vaux-Bjerke A, Quam JB, et al. Physical activity guidelines for Americans. 2023.
- ⁶ Yogman M, Garner A, Hutchinson J, Hirsh-Pasek K, Golinkoff RM. The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children. *Pediatrics*. 2018;142(3).
- ⁷ Gray P, Lancy DF, Bjorklund DF. Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Well-being: Summary of the Evidence. *The Journal of Pediatrics*. 2023;260:113352.
- ⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Physical Activity and Physical Education: Recess. <https://www.cdc.gov/physical-activity-education/recess> (accessed 09/17/25). 2024.
- ⁹ Kahan D, Poulos A. Models of school recess for combatting overweight in the United States. *Prev Med Rep*. 2023;31:102081.
- ¹⁰ Hodges VC, Centeo EE, Morgan CF. The benefits of school recess: A systematic review. *Journal of School Health*. 2022;92(10):959–967.
- ¹¹ Howie EK, Perryman KL, Moretta J, Cameron L. Educational outcomes of recess in elementary school children: A mixed-methods systematic review. *PLoS One*. 2023;18(11):e0294340.
- ¹² Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, Dymnicki AB, Taylor RD, Schellinger KB. The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child development*. 2011;82(1):405–432.
- ¹³ London RA. It is not called recess anymore: Breaktime in middle school. *Journal of school health*. 2022;92(10):968–975.
- ¹⁴ Clevenger KA, Perna FM, Moser RP, Berrigan D. Associations between state laws governing recess policy with children's physical activity and health. *Journal of school health*. 2022;92(10):976–986.
- ¹⁵ Konduru D, Lowrey KM, Hager ER. Leveling the Playing Field: Opportunities for School Recess to Promote Wellness and Reduce Disparities in Elementary School Children. *American Journal of Health Promotion*. 2025;08901171251319847.
- ¹⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and SHAPE America—Society of Health and Physical Educators. *Strategies for Recess in Schools*. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, US Dept of Health and Human Services.; 2017.
- ¹⁷ Kuhn AP, Choudhary A, Zemanick A, et al. Student perceptions of US based school day physical activity best practices in relation to accelerometer-based sedentary behavior and activity. *Preventive medicine reports*. 2025;49:102944.
- ¹⁸ Global Recess Alliance. The Imperative of School Recess for All Students. September, 2025.
- ¹⁹ American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, Murray R, C R, et al. The crucial role of recess in school. *Pediatrics*. 2013 (reaffirmed in 2023);131(1):183–188.
- ²⁰ Jarrett O. A research-based case for recess: Position paper. *US Play Coalition in collaboration with American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA/USA) and the Alliance for Childhood*. 2019.
- ²¹ Massey WV, Ramstetter CL, McCleery J, von Wildenradt R. A Call for States to Level the Playing Field in School Recess. *Journal of School Health*. 2025.
- ²² Carriedo A, Cecchini JA. A longitudinal examination of withholding all or part of school recess on children's physical activity and sedentary behavior: evidence from a natural experiment. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 2023;51(4):605–614.
- ²³ Fink DB, Ramstetter CL. "Even If They're Being Bad, Maybe They Need a Chance to Run Around": What Children Think About Recess. *Journal of School Health*. 2018;88(12):928–935.
- ²⁴ Tsai MM, Olarte DA, Hager ER, Cohen JFW, Turner L. Prevalence of Recess and Supportive Practices at a Nationwide Sample of Public Elementary Schools in the United States. *J Sch Health*. 2024;94(4):366–373.
- ²⁵ Monnat SM, Lounsbery MA, McKenzie TL, Chandler RF. Associations between demographic characteristics and physical activity practices in Nevada schools. *Preventive medicine*. 2017;95:S4–S9.
- ²⁶ SHAPE America. What Is PE? SHAPE America Essential Components. https://www.shapeamerica.org/MemberPortal/publications/resources/teachingtools/teachertoolbox/What_Is_Physical_Education.aspx accessed 11/11/25.
- ²⁷ Bark K, Stenberg M, Sutherland S, Hayes D. Scheduling recess before lunch: exploring the benefits and challenges in Montana schools. 2010.
- ²⁸ Bergman EA, Buerger NS, Englund TF, Femrite A. The relationship of meal and recess schedules to plate waste in elementary schools. *J Child Nutr Manag*. 2004;28(2):1–10.
- ²⁹ Chapman LE, Cohen J, Canterberry M, Carton TW. Factors associated with school lunch consumption: Reverse recess and school "brunch". *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. 2017;117(9):1413–1418.

