

Kelly J. Sisson Lessens, PhD



March 3, 2019

Letter in Support of HB 70

Dear Representative Rasmussen,

My name is Kelly Lessens, and I am a parent in the Anchorage School District and a co-founder of the group ASD60. Our group has been advocating for increased, evidence-based times for nutrition and play for all of ASD's nearly 24,000 elementary students. Even though our advocacy has focused on Anchorage, alone, more than 2,850 people statewide have supported our online petition. We have more than 6,000 supporters nationwide.

Toward the end of February, I had the opportunity to watch the off-Broadway production of "The Sound of Music" in downtown Anchorage's Performing Arts Center. If you are familiar with this classic musical, you will recognize the moment when "Maria," the effervescent nun-turned-governess, takes aim at the seven Von Trapp children's "uniforms." While envisioning turning curtains into clothing for them to "play" in, she asks about their daily routines. Mornings, replies Captain Von Trapp, are for schoolwork. In the afternoons, they go outside to march. "March?" Maria asks incredulously. The audience—full of Anchorage families—laughed *knowingly*, because the joke was clear: the Von Trapp children—like kids everywhere—need to *play every day*.<sup>1</sup>

I share the anecdote because I want you to think about it every time you debate SB56. I am delighted that you have sponsored this bill with the intention to provide all of Alaska's students with more robust in-school opportunities to receive 90% of the sixty minutes of moderate-to-vigorous activity that the CDC has shown that they need to remain healthy.

HB 70 (and its counterpart, SB 56) is necessary because current statute, which arose out of SB 200, does not *require* districts to implement any guidelines for physical activity they may create. Current statute also does not specify that all activities counting towards the 54 minutes of activity should be of "moderate-to-vigorous" quality. Without such explicit provisions, a school could count pencil sharpening, standing for the Pledge of Allegiance, pivoting from one spot on a rug to another, or transitioning between classrooms as activities that help attain the CDC's 60-minute target of moderate-to-vigorous activity, even though none of these really affords the benefits that come from getting a child's heart pumping.

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<sup>1</sup> See Michael Yogman, "The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children," *Pediatrics* (September 2018) vol 142 no. 3. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/142/3/e20182058>

My work with ASD60 has made me aware that, in Anchorage, ASD's current response to SB200 instructs elementary schools to provide 90 minutes of Physical Education each week and 100 minutes of recess to elementary students. But if the intent of SB200 was for schools to provide 54 minutes of physical activity a day (totaling 270 total minutes each week), ASD has tasked teachers with finding an additional 80 minutes, each week, while simultaneously prioritizing curricular guidelines that hinder such opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

Now, the use of the word "shall" in SB 56/HB 70, I think, gets closer to SB 200's original intent: to get our kids up and moving and therefore doing better in school and in life. This revision matters because (as physicians testified before the Anchorage School Board in January, 2019) not all students have opportunities outside of the school day to move their bodies in a "moderate to vigorous" way—sometimes they live in a dangerous neighborhood where they simply aren't allowed to recreate outside, or they live in a cold and dark place and have inadequate gear, or they simply don't have caregivers who can provide time, money, or wherewithal to model healthy physical activities. Given these realities of life in Alaska, I would respectfully suggest that a statewide policy requiring school districts to *implement* opportunities for physical activity via recess and PE would be the only way to know that all students will receive 90% of the CDC's recommendations for moderate to vigorous physical activity in school.

Opportunities for physical activity are precisely what Alaska's students need to learn and grow. Physical activity not only stimulates neural connections, but it can provide a counterweight to our costly obesity epidemic. A major CDC study, for instance, recently pegged cost of "the mean annual expenditure difference per capita for inactive adults compared to active adults (as) \$1,437." This translates to a 29.9% difference in costs between active and non-active adults.<sup>3</sup> Alaska's lawmakers should pay attention to such numbers, because today's inactive adolescents are going to be the cost-drivers of tomorrow. As of 2016, only 20% of Alaska's adolescents were receiving 60 minutes of physical activity every day of the week, 13.7% of adolescents were overweight, and an additional 12.4% qualified as obese.<sup>4</sup> Putting some teeth into statute via SB 56/HB 70 ought to manifest health improvements, and therefore cost savings, for the state down the road.

### **What *is* physical activity?**

Let's return to the Von Trapp children. Their father wanted them to march every afternoon. Would it have been fun? Probably not, and they probably wouldn't have learned much, either. That's part of why the Anchorage audience laughed.

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<sup>2</sup> Anchorage School District, "Elementary: Physical Activity in Schools Law." Document included in Melanie Sutton to Carey Carpenter, February, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Susan A. Carlson, "Inadequate Physical Activity and Health Care Expenditures in the United States," *Progress in Cardiovascular Diseases* 57 (2015) 315-323. <https://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/docs/carlson-physical-activity-and-healthcare-expenditures-final-508tagged.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Alaska State Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Profile, <https://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/state-local-programs/profiles/alaska.html>

In school, physical activity has different components: Physical Education, brain breaks, and recess. These are different and complementary.

According to the Alaska Department of Health and Human Services, “Quality Physical Education” teaches fundamental and specialized movement skills, improves motor skills, provides a foundation for developing lifelong physical fitness habits, teaches responsible and appropriate personal and social behaviors in a group setting, increases self-esteem, and improves academic performance.

The “essential elements of a quality physical education program” must include the following:

- All students required to take physical education
- Total of 150 minutes/week for elementary students
- Total of 225 minutes/week for secondary students
- Meaningful sequential content following national or state standards
- Not assigned as or withheld as punishment
- Waivers are not allowed from physical education class time or credit requirements
- Ongoing student and program assessment.<sup>5</sup>

I’d like you to return to my daughter’s Anchorage elementary school, where students receive something very close to the 90 minutes of PE a week that ASD outlines in their response to SB200. This is *sixty minutes less* than the 150 minutes that Alaska’s Department of Health and Human Services articulates both above and in Alaska’s Gold Standard Wellness Plan, its model Board Policy 5040.<sup>6</sup> The State needs to make this right.

Let’s compare ASD’s policy to Seward’s, where elementary students have—*for more than a decade*—received thirty minutes of PE each day, totaling 150 minutes per week. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, Seward’s staff “noticed improved student performance immediately after adding more PE time. During the school year following the addition of PE classes, the percent of students proficient in math skills increased in grades 3-6 (Seward Elementary taught preschool through sixth grade until last year, when sixth grade moved to the middle school). The percent of students proficient in reading skills also increased in grades 3 and 5. “We believe incorporating PE every day was a contributing factor in bringing our school’s percent proficient up and keeping it at that high level in the subsequent years,” said David Kingsland, who has been principal at Seward Elementary for the past 15 years.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Physical Education. <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/chronic/pages/schoolhealth/pe.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> See item “C: Physical Education” in *State of Alaska Gold Standard School Wellness Policy STUDENT NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY BP 5040*, 9/19/16 Alaska Obesity Prevention & Control Program. Option

<http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Documents/Obesity/pubs/AlaskaGoldStandardSchoolWellnessPolicy.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> “Seward School makes PE a daily priority,” October 22, 2018.

<http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/PlayEveryDay/blog/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?ID=291>

Physical Education, in sum, is an incredibly important part of the day, and the CDC and Alaska's Gold Standard Wellness Plan recommend 150 minutes for elementary students, each week, and 225 for secondary students. Were the State to craft policy with respect to these targets, it would be well within the realm of the possible to schedule an additional 120 minutes (or more) of physical activity through recess, each week, so as to reach the 270-minute mark for physical activity.

A boost in the time scheduled for recess, for all students across the state of Alaska, would have far-reaching implications. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the unstructured, child-directed, outdoor play that takes place during recess provides children with instruction in self-control, self-motivation, and social and emotional development. Recess, as something totally separate from physical education, improves focus, attentiveness, cooperation, sharing, self-control, academic performance, and executive function (e.g. the process of learning, rather than the content). It provides physical activity that reduces fidgeting, combats childhood obesity and physiological problems, and activates the brain for learning. Like no other time in a child's day, recess provides outdoor time that reduces stress and anxiety, and improves mental health, behavior, and problem-solving skills.<sup>8</sup>

In Anchorage, our school board's year-old "Board Policy 5040" outlines the expectation that schools provide a minimum of 20 minutes of recess each day. Over the course of my advocacy work with ASD60, however, I have learned that what our 24,000 students actually receive depends on the elementary school they attend. Based on a combination of ASD data and my own phone calls, I have learned that:

- 2 schools (both charter, serving disproportionately lower-than-average percentages of students-of-color and disadvantaged students) provide 45 minutes of recess;
- 6 schools provide 30 minutes of recess;
- 27 schools provide 22-25 minutes of recess (though most of these do not provide transition times between lunch and recess, and so any time added to the 20 minute recess minimum is negligible);
- 31 schools adhere to the minimum 20 minute threshold.

Alaska's lawmakers need to understand that what ASD60 is seeing in our state's largest district is a separate and unequal allocation of time for one of the very things that students need most in the day: unstructured play. Of ASD's top 8 most generous recess providers, only 2 are schools whose populations are comprised of more than 40% disadvantaged students. This echoes national themes where poor students and students of color tend to receive less time for recess than their white and/or more well-off peers; as the AAP points out, "the period allotted to recess decreases as the child ages and is less abundant among children of lower socioeconomic status and in the urban setting."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "The Crucial Role of Recess in School," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 131, No. 1 January 2013  
<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/1/183>

<sup>9</sup> "The Crucial Role of Recess in School," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 131, No. 1 January 2013  
<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/1/183>

These discrepancies matter—and would be ameliorated with stronger state-level policies—because a tremendous body of research states how important recess is not just to physical health, but also to learning. Schools that have increased the time for recess have seen improvements in academic performance and decreases in behavior issues. Kids with more recess can learn the same amount of material in a shorter amount of time. Expanding recess not only in Anchorage elementary schools (where my group has been asking for 30 minutes each day), but statewide, would improve classroom behaviors, academic outcomes, and physical health. The CDC, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the [Liink program](#) in Texas, the Finnish educational system and a host of other organizations have emphatically demonstrated how breaks for recess augment behaviors and achievement.

Over the past two years, for example, nearly every teacher at Aquarian Elementary School in Anchorage has incorporated an additional 15 minute morning recess into their lesson plans. Even though some staff were initially hesitant about losing academic contact time, they now emphasize that this additional break—which happens *in addition to a scheduled sixty minute block* for recess and lunch—renders fundamentally different results in students’ focus and behavior than in-class, “brain breaks” promote.

Other schools across Alaska have prioritized recess. In the rainy town of Petersburg, Stedman Elementary students play outside under a roof that covers basketball hoops, four square games and other areas. In Utqiagvik, Fred Ipalook Elementary has created an indoor playground replete with jungle gyms, slides, ladders, basketball hoops and open space. Monica Lugo, the physical education teacher, opens it to all students every day of the school year during normal recess time, for extra recess sessions and as a reward for demonstrating good behavior at school.<sup>10</sup>

As a parent, as someone who has become deeply versed in the literature regarding play and recess, I know that that these schools are on the right track, because there really is no false dichotomy between time for recess and time for academics. Recess matters because neither Physical Education classes nor teacher-led “brain boosts” (which I know that ASD teachers rely on, when they can, to chip away at the 80-minute shortfall in time formally allocated to physical activity) offer students the *unstructured time* that they need to develop their full capacities for “executive function” and relationship building, which they need to succeed in life.

Recess is also a tremendous equalizer: it brings kids from different backgrounds together. Indeed, Nicolle Egan, President of Special Olympics Alaska, recently observed that recess provides one of the only times in a day where SPED students and students with cognitive disabilities can be with their peers in an equal environment.<sup>11</sup> Recess also enables kids to be

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<sup>10</sup> “It’s cold, it’s dark, but Utqiagvik kids still play every day,”

<http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/PlayEveryDay/blog/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?ID=434>

<sup>11</sup> Nicolle Egan, “Play Community” panel, February 21, 2019 Alaska Pacific University.

better positioned to learn. In a private conversation with ASD60, Dr. Randall Zernzach, who treats children with fetal alcohol syndrome, high-risk NICU babies, children with traumatic experiences, and kids with ADHD as one of Alaska's two pediatric neurodevelopmental specialists, observed that, because students with ADHD need frequent rewards, increased time for recess may decrease the degree of impairment in a classroom, which, by extension, would support student learning.

Across the country, districts and states are choosing to buck a decades-long trend of minimizing time for recess by augmenting the time that students receive. Texas schools that added more recess found students scored significantly higher in math and reading than previous classes, were more attentive and cooperative in class, and had more energy at home.

In part because of the Liink program's success, not to speak of the Finnish model, cold-climate school districts like Seattle, Minneapolis, Detroit, and Madison WI all now guarantee 30 minutes of recess. And in 2018, the state of Virginia passed legislation permitting individual school districts to allocate up to 15% of the school day (that is, up to 50 minutes) to recess. Districts across the state, from Fairfax County, to Prince William County, Loudon County and beyond, have taken advantage of new parameters. Because Loudon County Schools now offers its students 40 minutes of recess, I reached out to Dr. Michael Martin, the Director of Elementary Education, to ask about how recess-heavy scheduling priorities have shaped behaviors and outcomes since the start of the school year. Although his district is awaiting firm data, he shared the following: "most teachers I've spoken with report that the additional recess has resulted in fewer behavioral issues as students have more opportunities to "get the wiggles out" before returning to more academic tasks. Given that observation, my assumption is that this more developmentally-appropriate use of instructional minutes will provide social and emotional benefits for our students while increasing their mental readiness for learning."

Although I have focused my efforts within the Anchorage School District, I'm here to say that all of Alaska's children need a more robust requirement that districts provide more than mere guidelines: they need a promise that our state will do everything it can to ensure that *all* students *receive* crucial time to be moderately-to-physically active in school, through a combination of directed Physical Education and—like those Von Trapp family singers who climbed every mountain and forded every stream...until they found (their) dream"—self-directed recess.

Thank you for your time and service. If you have any questions, feel free to look at our group's website at <https://asd60.org> or reach out to me at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,  
Kelly Lessens