

Anchorage School District Wellness Initiative Evaluation

Executive Summary: Principal Interview Results

The State of Alaska Physical Activity and Nutrition unit completed the principal interview component of the Anchorage School District Wellness Initiative evaluation. These interviews examined the process and impact of the initiative. The district conducted teacher, student and parent satisfaction surveys and a consultant completed additional inquiry. The principal interview results tell only part of the story and are not to be used without considering the results provided by the district and the consultant.

The initiative included:

- 10 minutes seated time for breakfast, if the school provided a breakfast;
- 20 minutes seated time for lunch;
- 54 minutes of physical activity (90% of the national recommendation), which includes 30 minutes of recess and a combination of physical education, school-wide activities and in-classroom activities; and
- maintaining the overall integrity of the K-5 English Language Arts/Reading intent.

Methods

Key informant interviews were conducted with 19 of the 20 principals from Anchorage School District (ASD) elementary schools participating in the Wellness Initiative during the 2019-20 school year. All interviews took place between November 11, 2019 and December 15, 2019 and occurred by telephone or in-person, depending on the principals' preferences. Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes and followed a set of scripted questions written by the state staff and approved by the ASD Evaluation Team. Transcripts of the interviews were coded for responses, categories and themes; results are a blend of quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Most participating principals support continuing the initiative

Almost two-thirds (63%; 12 of 19) of interviewed principals said they would continue implementing the initiative during future school years if given the option. These principals cited the importance of prioritizing time for eating lunch and getting physical activity.

Of the remaining seven principals: one said yes to continuing the 30 minutes of recess, but not continuing the 20 minutes of seated lunch time for older students; three said they would not continue the initiative, referring to a burden on staff to supervise lunch or preferring more flexibility of teachers taking a second recess break on their own; and the final three principals were undecided, stating that they needed more time or more input from staff before deciding.

Eight of the 19 (42%) participating principals recommended expanding the initiative to the remaining elementary schools in the district. Almost as many principals (37%; 7 of 19), however, were still undecided or hesitant to comment on the needs of another school, with several mentioning they would recommend an option for principals to participate if it met the needs of the school's community. Three principals said they would not recommend expanding the initiative, and one principal did not comment.

About half of participating principals (47%; 9 of 19) believed the initiative had no impact on the integrity of the K-5 English Language Acquisition/Reading intent. Almost a third (32%; 6 of 19) believed it had a negative impact on the intent, largely referring to the loss of instructional time. A few (16%; 3 of 19) said it had a positive impact, citing improved relationships between teachers and students and the students' improved abilities to pay attention in class during the initiative. One response could not be categorized.

Providing 20 minutes of seated time to eat lunch

Most principals said they provided 15-20 seated minutes for seated lunch time during the previous school year.

Changes reported to accommodate the 20 minutes of seated lunch time:

- Adjusted the school schedule, extended the lunch time (19 of 19) and transition times
- Took time away from instruction for social studies, science and/or language arts (26%; 5 of 19)
- Used alternative spaces for lunch (classrooms, libraries or rooms for health or art classes)
- Tightened transition times between subjects or cut items like group scheduled bathroom breaks

Challenges principals named related to providing extended seated time for lunch:

- Increased supervision of students
 - Most principals (74%; 14 of 19) said teachers were now required to supervise students during lunch in some way. Principals reported some teachers enjoyed this additional time with students, but others were upset that their duty-free time had shrunk from 45 minutes per day to the contractual time of 30 minutes.
 - Some schools increased the daily hours for noon duties or kindergarten assistants.
- Competing demands for the multipurpose room or library
 - Using these rooms for more lunch time limited the space for physical education or other classes
- Dealing with more students in the lunchroom at the same time

Feedback about lunch from students and teachers/staff

In general, principals reported more positive than negative feedback from students (63%; 12 of 19) and teachers (53%; 10 of 19) about the having 20 minutes seated time for lunch. Overall, principals observed students liked having more time to eat lunch, especially the younger students in grades K-4. Students ate more of their lunch, had more time to talk and socialize, and felt less rushed. Some schools (21%; 4 of 19) noticed less food waste.

A third of principals (37%; 7 of 19) reported that teachers enjoyed the unstructured time to socialize and interact with their students during lunch. Some heard from teachers (21%; 4 of 19) about students returning to class with fewer behavioral problems, or that students were calmer and ready to learn.

Nearly a quarter of principals (21%; 4 of 19) reported equal amounts of positive and negative feedback from teachers and the remaining quarter (26%; 5 of 19) reported more negative feedback. In these schools, staff reported older students, didn't need extended time for lunch. When students finished their lunch noise and challenging behaviors increased. A third of principals (37%; 7 of 19) heard from teachers who did not want to supervise students during lunch. One principal heard frustration that the changes took away from academics. One school's custodial staff struggled to clean the lunchroom due to tighter schedules and shorter transitions.

Providing 30 minutes of recess

Over half of the principals (58%; 11 of 19) said students had 20 minutes of daily recess during the previous school year and two principals said 20-25 minutes. Three principals gave answers that fell outside this range.

During 2019-20, three-quarters of participating schools (74%; 14 of 19) provided one, 30-minute recess each day and two schools (11%) provided a 35-minute recess. Three schools (16%) provided two recesses totaling 30 or 35 minutes.

Changes reported to accommodate 30 minutes of recess:

- 19 of 19 (100%) principals reported adjusting staff, teacher assistant or noon duty schedules to help provide recess supervision.

Challenges principals named related to providing 30 minutes of recess:

- Finding time in the daily schedule and making that change work for staff was the most commonly mentioned.
- Reduced time for academics or stress from tighter academic transition times (32%; 6 of 19).
- Noon duties required to stay outside longer, particularly in inclement weather.

Feedback about daily recess from students and teachers/staff

Three-quarters of principals (74%; 14 of 19) received more positive than negative feedback from students regarding 30 minutes of daily recess. Some principals said the increased recess time allowed students to enjoy organized games. Overall, principals felt recess helped students focus later in the day and there was more good behavior and fewer disciplinary referrals.

Almost two-thirds of principals (63%; 12 of 19) said they heard more positive than negative feedback from teachers and staff about the 30 minutes of daily recess. Principals reported the following positive feedback from teachers and staff: students played well with others; children had more time to be active; students came back to class ready to learn and better behaved; and teachers enjoyed having more time to get to know their students.

Three principals (16%) said they heard equal amounts of positive and negative feedback. Four principals (21%) said they heard more negative feedback, with two principals specifying that feedback came from the noon duty staff. Two principals said students said they were bored during recess and didn't want to be outside, but these kids were often the ones who said similar things when recess was shorter. Twelve principals (63%) reported fewer or no change in disciplinary referrals from last year, four (21%) gave unclear responses, and four principals (21%) reported an increase in disciplinary referrals. The principals noted that increase could be a sign for more supervision or that social interaction is increasing during longer recesses and students are learning about mediation; they noted that was not necessarily a negative. Principals noted that some staff did not like to be outside for longer recesses, did not like to supervise recess, noticed a reduction in academic and instructional time, and experienced increased stress and higher expectations.

Tips from principals for implementing the initiative

Tips to improve overall implementation:

- Prioritize teacher buy-in because it is critical for successful implementation.
- Take the time to work with staff to create a schedule that works, including transition times in the schedule.
- Make sure you have staff and supervision available to manage students with the new schedule.
- Make sure all staff are trained and understand expectations for lunch and recess.
- Share the change to lunch and recess time with families and staff through meetings, open houses, newsletters, social media, online, emails and the electronic robocall system.

Tips to improve implementation of seated lunch time:

- Offer activities or games to students who finished lunch early.
- Consider lunch in the classroom to reduce transition times, or staggered lunch starts to reduce time waiting in line
- Add 10 minutes of flexible time when students can eat lunch or return to the classroom if finished. One school used this strategy, saying it reduced noise and behavior problems.
- Ask kindergarten assistants to work as extra noon duties.

Tips to improve implementation of recess and 54 minutes of daily activity:

- Be flexible and creative when creating the recess schedule. Two principals provided two shorter recesses totaling 30 minutes, saying students were excited about two recesses. In another example, one principal said one, 30-minute recess reduced the amount of lost instruction time.
- Provide hand warmers and gear for staff needing to be outside in inclement weather longer for extended recess.
- Provide a space where students or staff can come in for a few minutes to warm up, if needed.
- Consider multiple ways to achieve the total 54 minutes of daily physical activity: use the district-supplied resources for ideas; use in-classroom activities like brain breaks and Go Noodle; try interactive videos, dancing, or yoga; and use open gym space when it is available.

Making decisions based on the results

The principal interview results tell only part of the story and are not to be used without considering the results provided by the district and consultant. The district surveyed teachers, students and parents. Teacher at participating and nonparticipating elementary schools complete surveys to help compare student behavior in initiative-participating versus nonparticipating schools. Some third and fourth graders took surveys near the end of the school day to ask about stress, happiness and hunger levels. Parents were questioned about their children's behavior and hunger levels after school. A consultant conducted focus groups with school staff and parents to learn more.

To determine if the initiative is benefiting students and help decide if all schools in the district should implement the initiative in future school years, these results should be combined with the district and consultant results.

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