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Recess is gone: Two Belleville schools now spend that time learning

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Emma O'Donnell (left) participates in Justine Schulte's 6th grade Spanish class Wednesday at Signal Hill School in Belleville. STEVE NAGY/BND — snagy@bnd.com | [Buy Photo](#)



Eighth-grader Devin Taylor spent his 25-minute recess playing basketball last year. This year, he spends his recess time on math and reading comprehension as part of Emge Junior High School's Intervention Challenge program.

"I miss recess," Devin said. "I can't play basketball anymore. We don't get much time to do it during school."

He described the intervention program as "OK."

"I didn't like it at first, but now it's getting better," he said.

Both Emge Junior High and Signal Hill schools in Belleville eliminated recess for their upper grade levels, and instead use the time for instructional programs this school year.

Emge Junior High has an Intervention Challenge to provide students extra help with math and reading. Signal Hill has three different programs for sixth- through eighth-graders during what was previously recess time -- a Spanish class, a leadership class and an intervention program.

School officials say the change was necessary to accommodate more academic time, and students still get adequate physical activity with physical education every day.

"We have the luxury of junior high students having P.E. every day for 45 minutes," said Signal Hill Principal Kelly West.

"Very few schools offer P.E. every day to fifth- and sixth-graders," said Pam Leonard, superintendent of Harmony-Emge School District 175, which includes Emge Junior High School. Students at Emge also have P.E. for 45 minutes each day.

St. Clair County Regional Office of Education Superintendent Susan Sarfaty said state law requires physical education for all grades, but recess is not mandated.

"I don't think there are actually very many schools that have recess at all for the junior high kids," Sarfaty said.

Whiteside School District 115 Superintendent Peggy Burke said sixth- through eighth-graders do not have recess, but fifth-graders do have recess for about 20 minutes a day. Even though they attend Whiteside Middle School, she explained fifth-grade is still structured like an elementary grade.

Belleville School District 118 Superintendent Matt Klosterman said the district does not have a structured recess for junior high students -- seventh- and eighth-graders. "There is an opportunity for them to get outside during their lunch period," he said. Fifth- and sixth-graders do have recess at District 118 elementary schools.

Both West and Leonard said recess time is being eliminated to enrich student learning.

"We really looked at differentiating instruction for students," Leonard said. "We wanted to provide some unique opportunities for them."

With the elimination of recess for upper grade levels this year, both Emge Junior High Principal Kim Ray and West said student discipline issues have decreased.

"We have less discipline problems this year than we did last year at this time," Ray said.

"It has decreased our discipline, because a lot of that happens at recess," West said. "Physical education is much more effective than having drama (at recess)."

Earlier this month, retired educator Paul Zientarski, of Naperville, spoke about the importance of physical activity for students during the school day during the fifth annual Southwestern Illinois Health Policy Summit in Belleville.

"To go from class to class to class, it really doesn't improve the learning of the brain," Zientarski said. "If the brain isn't prepared for learning, more seat time doesn't improve it."

He explained the brain learns best following physical activity such as P.E. or recess. "I'm glad they (Signal Hill and Emge) have 45 minutes of daily P.E. -- that's important," Zientarski said.

Purposeful recess is also beneficial, he said.

"If recesses are just 15 minutes where the kids are not encouraged to be active, they really don't serve a purpose," Zientarski said. "If you want to make recess time purposeful, you have to allow kids to move and be active."

Here's what the new classes look like at Signal Hill and Emge Junior High schools:

Intervention Challenge

The Intervention Challenge program for the 325 fifth- through eighth-graders at Emge Junior High incorporates reading, math and character education. Ray said two days a week are spent on reading, two days a week on math and one day a week on character education.

The math practice incorporates the computer-based program MobyMax, which is what sixth-grader Mylan Mccaleb was working on during a recent class. He was answering multiple choice problems regarding estimating the size of objects in feet, inches or centimeters.

"It's fun because it helps me in math a little bit," Mylan said, "and I get game time and earn badges."

Teacher Janet Brinkman said students earn game time on MobyMax after completing a designated amount of problems.

"Yeah, I miss it," Mylan said of recess, "but I barely notice we don't have it."

Brinkman described the Intervention Challenge as "awesome." She said students seem to like it, but they do miss recess.

Teacher Jamie Williams was working on an animal project with fifth-graders during an Intervention Challenge class. The project involved students researching two different animals and creating a new animal that incorporates characteristics of the two animals they picked. The students will then write a story about their imaginary animal.

Fifth-grader Markeyla Hughes wishes Emge still had recess, but described the Intervention program as "fun."

Teacher Margie O'Dell said she wishes the Intervention time was longer. "I definitely think it is a positive," she said. "It allows them to be in a smaller group setting and get more one-on-one help."

The Intervention Challenge classes are relatively small with a maximum of 18 students per class. "We want students to have individualized attention," Ray said.

Eighth-grader Aneehya Dickens said she feels the time would be better spent if it was a study hall where students could complete homework.

As a result of the new program, Ray hopes to see an increase in students' scores on state standardized tests.

Spanish class

As sixth-graders at Signal Hill enter Justine Schulte's class, they greeted each other in Spanish by saying "Hola" (Hello) or "Como estas?" (How are you?). Schulte reviewed the day of the week and the time of day in Spanish with her students.

Sixth-grader Emma O'Donnell volunteered to be part of a skit to help Schulte review past tense verb structures with the class. To ensure the students were following along during the class, which was conducted mostly in Spanish, Schulte often asked, "correcto" or "comprende."

"It's really fun," sixth-grader Katelyn Downard, 12, said of Spanish. "I like Senorita Schulte. She makes everything really fun and easier to learn." Katelyn doesn't miss recess. She said Spanish is more fun.

Emma said she doesn't miss recess either. "A lot of students complained at the beginning of the year," she said. "I think they changed their minds now," Katelyn chimed in.

Emma's mother Jennifer O'Donnell of Belleville said her daughter enjoys the Spanish class. "She tries to teach me Spanish, but it doesn't really work," O'Donnell said. "She doesn't have any problems missing recess. She enjoys going to Spanish class."

Classmate Wyatt Shellabarger, 12, said he "kind of" misses recess, but "probably likes Spanish more."

"The majority of the students have been very enthusiastic about it," Schulte said.

Students often stop her in the hall to converse in Spanish. "It's exciting that they are excited about it," she said.

Having Spanish in junior high will give students an advantage going into high school. "Not that many elementary schools offer a foreign language," Schulte said.

All sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders at Signal Hill will receive one semester of Spanish this year, and fifth-graders attend a Spanish class once a week.

It's been an adjustment for older students who were accustomed to having recess time, but Schulte said she has "a lot of student engagement in class" as she's using the Teaching Proficient through Reading and Storytelling method, known as TPRS.

Schulte attended a TPRS seminar over the summer. "It's ridiculous how effective it is. It just clicks from the repetitiveness," she said. "It's just so much more effective than handing out worksheets or reading in a book all the time."

Schulte's part-time teacher salary is being covered by a grant from the Signal Hill Education Foundation.

Leadership class

Equipped with 25 plastic straws, eight paper clips and five pieces of string, eighth-graders in social worker Katie Nowell's leadership class at Signal Hill worked in small groups to build the highest freestanding tower possible.

The students in groups of four brainstormed ideas for five minutes and then had 10 minutes to build a tower. Eighth-grader Nadia Durham's group constructed a tower that resembled the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Nadia said she doesn't miss recess and finds the leadership class "very interesting."

Eighth-grader Mykala Smith also likes the class, but enjoyed recess more.

"It's fun, and it's different than any other class," Mykala said. "I like recess better."

Seventh-grader Cameron Clark said he doesn't miss recess and thinks the leadership class is fun.

"We get to do different activities," he said. "It shows us how to be leaders and work as a team."

Cameron's mother Michelle Johnson of Belleville said he really likes the class. "I think it helps them (students) more than just having recess," she said, "to have a leadership class to teach them how to be a leader and how to include team members."

The leadership class is based on Sean Covey's book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens." The tower-building exercise was built around the habit of synergize or cooperation.

Nowell said the leadership class is "going well," but has had its "ups and downs" since it's a new class. "The kids at the beginning were kind of in shock," she said, that there was no recess. "We're working together to make it as successful and interesting as possible."

Nowell hopes to teach the students foundation skills like goal setting, organization and time management. "I want to strengthen those life skills so they can be successful throughout their middle school careers and as they go onto high school," she said.

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