

Lunch Is a Must-Have, Recess Is a Nice-to-Have

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As the presidential campaign continues to focus on economic woes, it's a good time to remember that many of our nation's kids are in trouble as well. That, in turn, can affect the economy itself. Admittedly, it's a topic heretofore without much of a voice. Until now.

With the impending election, there's a cacophony of debate about how children should be taught, tested, and measured to ensure their academic success. That's fine, but overwhelmingly, the country's youth is failing to get the physical activity or proper nutrition it needs to thrive and be healthy. One measurable consequence: their academic performance is suffering.

Alarming, fewer than 4% of elementary schools, 8% of middle schools, and 2% of high schools [even offer daily physical education classes](#). Playing sports, being on a team and being physically active can do great things for a child's strength and self-confidence. I experienced it as a high school basketball player, and I see it now with my own children.

Beyond the necessary health benefits of daily nutrition and exercise for kids as they grow, physical activity during the school day [stimulates the development of cognitive and social skills](#) and enables kids who have a harder time focusing to stay on task. It builds brains, quite literally. Why, then, are we making it increasingly hard for kids to get the recommended daily amounts?

To be sure, great work is already taking place to reduce the incidence of overweight and obesity rate of 33%, from USDA's recent updates to school meal standards to programs, including Let's Move!, The President's Council, Fuel Up to Play 60, and KaBOOM! Each encourages kids to lead more active lives. Yet, despite our combined efforts, the pressure that government policies, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or No

Child Left Behind, have put on schools to place singular value on academics will leave our kids behind in school and beyond.

In fact, Sec. of Education Arne Duncan, in a recent [op-ed](#) in the Washington Post, criticized reforms to No Child Left Behind for continuing "to encourage schools to narrow curriculum at the expense of important subjects such as history, civics, science, the arts and physical education." If we don't facilitate opportunities for school-based physical activity, we run the risk that our kids -- especially those who are less engaged -- will slip through the cracks.

Numerous studies cite the benefits of physical activity, as well as the adverse effects of inactivity, on a child's brain development. A 2010 [report](#) by the CDC found that physical activity during the school day positively influenced attention, attitude, behavior, and academic performance.

Still, only 18% of kids [get the 60 minutes](#) of physical activity they need daily, as recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

An Active Living Research [study](#), funded through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, demonstrated that providing elementary school students with daily 10-minute activity breaks improved the behavior of the least on-task students by a whopping 20 percent.

The health and development of future generations is at stake. In the long-term, the economy -- the No. 1 topic of this presidential election -- will take a hit if these areas remain woefully ignored. It's ironic that No Child Left Behind, a law intended to promote academic achievement, limits kids' ability to reach their full academic potential. Let's use this time to ensure the nation will listen and address this crisis of inactivity.

Alexis Glick is Chief Executive Officer of the GENYOUth Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to combating childhood obesity by empowering students to improve nutrition and physical activity with small steps to accelerate a lifetime of healthy changes.