

Responsive Recess: The Purpose, The Plan and Metrics of Success

As many are aware, the staff and students at Janney have been introducing, experiencing, and revising a responsive recess plan. Although some background has been provided via the newsletter, email, a PTA meeting, class newsletters and informal conversation, I recognize the need for a more comprehensive description; while I am confident that this piece will be a start, ongoing progress notes will be provided in the newsletter, and ongoing feedback is always welcome. In addition, the discussion has caused several questions to arise about the decision-making process, overarching values, communication among stakeholders, the plan as it stands now and as it will develop in the future, how success will be measured and resources for more information, representing a broad and healthy range of discourse that I will attempt to continue here.

Prompts and Diagnosis

We arrived at the decision to examine and refine recess for the following reasons:

- The construction process means that we will lose 50% of our play space for a bit over one year;
- We saw anecdotal evidence of physical aggression, bullying, exclusion from activities and an increase in the number of office behavior referrals during the recess period;
- A large number of students visited the nurse, bathrooms or water fountains during recess, often without cause (i.e. no visible injury, students who stand in the hallways without going to the bathroom or water fountain, etc.);
- We want to promote cooperation among our students;
- Staff conversations and contributions around the need for clearer expectations and space at recess.

In reviewing the aforementioned growth areas, we identified a lack of clarity around recess expectations and a need to foster student ownership of those expectations. The impending modernization forced us to examine recess more closely, and we chose to see that difficult situation as an opportunity to move in a positive direction. We also understood that the modernization could begin at any time and that work in the spring would contribute to a highly effective system in the fall.

Vision, Values, Responsive Classroom and Overarching Concepts of Play

The decisions we make at Janney rest on the foundations of our vision, values, and beliefs about students and their learning. We are always looking at ways to grow toward this vision by better aligning our actions and programs with our stated beliefs. As we considered how best to grow recess, we thought about:

- What we want for and from our students: respect, responsibility, safety, community, inclusion, equity, the importance of student voice, critical thinking, problem solving and cooperation.
- What we wanted from ourselves, the adult stakeholders: experimentation, collaboration and reflection.

- Our commitment to Responsive Classroom, an approach to elementary teaching that emphasizes both social and emotional growth across classroom and school-wide practices. The Responsive Classroom model asks adults to promote student choice, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy and self-control in the great variety of settings that exist in the school and in the larger world. (www.responsiveclassroom.org)
- The importance of “play.” We know that adequate time and space for play, both in terms of physical and social development is a critical and cherished element of our curriculum at Janney. While many schools have drastically reduced or eliminated recess, we simply want to consider how we can keep recess and make it an even better experience for our students.

The Plan for Play

The terms “structured play” and “free play” are often used, yet across a wide scope of research, neither is consistently defined. Our understanding of child development tells us that children feel safer experimenting and taking chances (like playing a new game or reaching out to a new friend) when *some* parameters or structures have been established – elements of both structured and free play.

Choice allows for freedom.

Imagine it’s Friday evening. You arrive home from work, tired from a productive, yet long, day (and week!). The last thing you want to think about is what’s for dinner, but when you walk through the front door, the discussion with your family goes something like this:

“What are we having for dinner?”

“What do you want?”

“What do we have?”

“Well, that depends on what you’re hungry for.”

Everyone’s stuck. Either they can’t think of anything, or they say the same thing they always say. Without some guidance, some parameters, it’s so hard to come up with an answer, and creativity is definitely not an option. On the other hand, if you could offer up some options, the ingredients available, the possibilities can surface, the creativity can kick in. You have to have a starting place. As with most things, we are aiming to achieve a balance, one that may shift and undulate over time.

As we set out to plan Responsive Recess, we were lucky enough to have several thought partners, including the fantastic minds of the Enteam organization (www.enteam.org). We knew that we did not want to adopt a holistic program, and have not, but the leaders at Enteam shared their understanding of cooperative recess and a vast resource of games and activities aligned to that thinking. They also questioned, gathered materials, led staff development and helped to facilitate the first week of recess. We hope to benefit from their advice, a wide scope of research,

and collaboration with other schools as we continue to reflect on our Responsive Recess. The plan we developed includes three stages:

1. Staff Led (the first week): During this week a significant amount of time was spent on agreements, game descriptions and reflections. Teachers accompanied their classes to recess each day, and students were required to experience each station.
2. Staff and Student Led (the second week): During this week we were committed to extending the time for play, while still asking students to contribute agreements and reflections for their spaces and activities. We increased the number of highly physical activities and creative spaces, allowed for free circulation and choice of students (including those who prefer activities other than the defined areas), and asked students to create games and solve problems with a greater level of independence. Staff members and students offered their own ideas for games and materials, and played alongside of one another.
3. Student Led with Staff Members as Thought and Play Partners (the future): As we move forward, students will increase their level of leadership of agreements, activities, reflections, mediations and problem solving. The activity content will be driven by student interests and we will work to provide choices that fully engage and challenge the boundaries of social learning.

Although these stages set out a “slow release plan,” metrics of success and constant reflection are key elements. We will observe the activities that seem to interest students most, interactions between students, the types of play to which individual students are drawn, levels of energy before and after recess and the transference of cooperative skills from the playground to the classroom. Our recess committee, in partnership with the whole staff, students and parents, will use these metrics to constantly improve Responsive Recess.

The Schedule

To manage the number of students in the play space during construction and to allow for an adequate lunch period for our younger students (after recess), the schedule for recess has been altered; the overall lunch/recess period has gone unchanged:

- 10:30 – 11:00: Morning Recess (All classes; No stations; Opportunity to practice cooperative play; Some classes have chosen to enjoy this recess in the afternoon because of their individual schedules or student needs)
- 12:00 – 12:30: PK, K, two classes of 3rd, 4th and 5th Lunch; 1st, 2nd, one class of 3rd Recess
- 12:30 – 1:00: PK, K, two classes of 3rd, 4th and 5th Recess; 1st, 2nd, one class of 3rd Lunch
- Afternoon Recess (30 minutes): An optional period for PK and K students to hold a play period

Communication and Decision-Making

In the spirit of our value of reflection, I understand there were some flaws to the way Responsive Recess was communicated to the broader community. There were two mentions in the weekly newsletter (one announcing a change and the other describing that change), discussions at LSRT meetings, discussions at PTA Executive Board meetings, two recess staff meetings and several Recess Committee meetings. As has been described, there were many components to this decision, some more obvious than others; however, there should always be a forum for questioning decisions, a critical role of stakeholders holding the administration and school accountable. While I appreciate the community's willingness to experiment thoughtfully and to allow for time to pass before levels of success are defined, the LSRT, PTA and I are holding active conversations and planning meetings to create more space for community input. Emails to LSRT members, PTA leadership and me are always welcome, but we are also developing input forums (whether in the form of evening office hours or surveys at arrival and dismissal), themed PTA meetings, and clarity around LSRT agendas and minutes (currently posted on the Janney website). I will continue holding monthly Principal Coffees and welcome quick conversations at arrival and dismissal as well as more formal, scheduled meetings.

In the case of recess, it has been difficult to capture the process on paper. While I hope this piece closes some of the knowledge gaps, I also invite everyone to observe – not just once, but as the process evolves and grows.

In the immediate future, an informal recess forum will be held at Janney on Friday, May 21st in the multipurpose room. Beginning at 5:30pm, the forum will end just in time to head to the Spring Picnic.

Resources

Much has been written about recess, but the following links include a wide variety of references on the topic:

- http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/pdf_files/13_1nl_1.pdf
- <http://www.responsiveclassroom.org>
- Creating A Safe & Friendly School
by the Northeast Foundation for Children
Chapter : New Ways to Play: Improving the quality of recess
page 36 (will be available at the recess forum)
- <http://www.playassociationhf.org.uk/wesbitedocs/summary%20of%20play%20types.pdf>
- Heck, A., Collins, J., & Peterson, L. (2001). Decreasing children's risk taking on the playground. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*,34, 349-352.
- <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=lvIXIiN0JwE&b=5118651&ct=6857723¬oc=1>
- <http://www.aap.org/pressroom/playfinal.pdf>
- <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/27/opinion/27elkind.html>

