



## Written Testimony in Support of A06939

**Hearing:** Join Legislative Budget Committee on Mental Hygiene

February 4, 2026

Dear Chairs Krueger and Pretlow and Members of the Joint Legislative Budget Committee on Mental Hygiene,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of A06939. This legislation recognizes a simple but powerful truth that decades of research have made clear: children learn better when their bodies are allowed to move.

Recess is not a break from learning, but a critical support for attention, behavior, emotional regulation, and academic performance. By establishing a statewide minimum standard for daily recess, A06939 strengthens the conditions under which students can succeed academically while also addressing the early drivers of chronic disease that undermine learning over time.

### **Chronic Disease and Learning Are Deeply Connected**

Chronic disease does not begin in adulthood, and neither do the learning challenges associated with poor physical and mental health. Nearly 40 percent of U.S. children now have at least one chronic condition, including asthma, obesity, diabetes, or serious mental health disorders.<sup>1</sup> These conditions are associated with increased absenteeism, reduced concentration, and behavioral challenges in the classroom.

At the same time, more than 80 percent of U.S. youth fail to meet recommended daily physical activity levels, contributing to fatigue, stress dysregulation, and impaired cognitive functioning.<sup>2</sup> Physical inactivity is linked not only to long-term disease risk, but also to short-term impacts on executive function, attention, and emotional control, all of which are foundational to academic success.<sup>3</sup>

Schools are one of the most important environments shaping both health and learning outcomes. When movement is removed from the school day, the consequences show up not only in health statistics, but also in classrooms.

### **Why Recess Supports Academic Achievement**

A strong and growing body of evidence shows that regular, unstructured physical activity during the school day improves learning outcomes rather than detracting from instructional time. Peer-reviewed research demonstrates that recess:

- Improves attention, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, helping students stay focused during instruction.<sup>4</sup>
- Reduces disruptive behavior and improves classroom engagement, particularly among students with higher needs.<sup>5</sup>
- Enhances emotional regulation and stress resilience, which supports learning readiness and peer relationships.<sup>6</sup>
- Improves on-task behavior and academic performance, even in high-pressure testing environments.<sup>7</sup>

The American Academy of Pediatrics has emphasized that recess should not be withheld for academic or disciplinary reasons, noting that children return from recess more attentive and better able to learn.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, studies consistently find that time spent in recess does not reduce academic achievement and is often associated with improved outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

## Recess as an Equity and Learning Support Tool

The loss of recess has not been evenly distributed. Schools serving lower-income communities are more likely to reduce or eliminate recess in favor of test preparation or behavior management strategies.<sup>10</sup> This approach often backfires. Withholding physical activity increases restlessness, worsens behavior, and makes instruction time more difficult, particularly for students already facing health and learning barriers.

Conversely, schools that protect daily recess report better attendance, improved classroom climates, and fewer disciplinary incidents.<sup>11</sup> These improvements create learning environments where teachers can teach more effectively and students are better positioned to succeed.

## Schools Are a Proven Setting for Learning-Focused Prevention

Children spend more than half of their waking hours in school. Policies that support healthy movement during the school day have been shown to increase the likelihood that students meet daily physical activity recommendations, while also improving cognitive and behavioral outcomes.<sup>12</sup>

A 2025 policy analysis led by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health identified daily recess as a key strategy for reducing sedentary behavior and supporting both health and educational outcomes at scale.<sup>13</sup> Recess is uniquely effective because it is inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and does not require specialized equipment or curriculum to deliver benefits.

## What A06939 Does

A06939 establishes a clear and consistent statewide standard that recognizes recess as essential to student success. The bill:

- Requires at least 30 minutes of daily recess for students in kindergarten through fifth grade, and sixth-grade students in elementary schools, when the instructional day exceeds five hours
- Defines recess as student-directed, supervised physical activity, distinct from physical education and lunch
- Prohibits the routine use of electronic devices during recess and encourages access to basic play materials
- Prioritizes outdoor recess when possible and provides flexibility for schools with space constraints
- Prohibits recess from being routinely withheld as punishment or used for academic instruction or test preparation

By protecting recess time, A06939 reinforces evidence-based practices that support attention, behavior, and learning readiness across the school day.

## Conclusion

Children cannot be expected to sit still for hours and perform at their best cognitively without opportunities for movement and play. Recess is not a distraction from education. It is a foundation for learning, health, and long-term success.

A06939 reflects what educators, pediatricians, and researchers have long understood: supporting children's physical well-being improves their ability to learn. I respectfully urge the Committee to advance this legislation and ensure that all New York students have access to daily recess as an essential component of a high-quality education.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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CEO, End Chronic Disease

## Endnotes

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