

Challenges, Benefits and Essential Factors for Success in Implementing a Recess Before Lunch Schedule in Montana Elementary Schools

2008 Survey Results

Introduction: More and more schools across the country have been scheduling recess before lunch (RBL) in recent years. This has become an increasingly popular school wellness strategy, due to observed improvements in student behavior, increased consumption of nutrient-dense foods, reduced plate waste and overall improvements in the quality of dining experiences for students. The Montana Team Nutrition Program (MTN) has worked with schools over the past seven years to help implement RBL across our state. MTN recently completed a pilot project with four elementary schools that implemented an RBL schedule to evaluate its impact. Positive preliminary results were seen in respect to decreased food and beverage waste and overall acceptance by staff and students. Since 2002, the number of Montana elementary schools that have implemented this schedule change has continued to increase, with 32 percent of Montana schools having an RBL schedule in place for the 2008-09 school year. From working with these schools, MTN has published a Recess Before Lunch Implementation Guide, which is available at <http://www.opi.mt.gov/schoolfood/recessBL.html>.

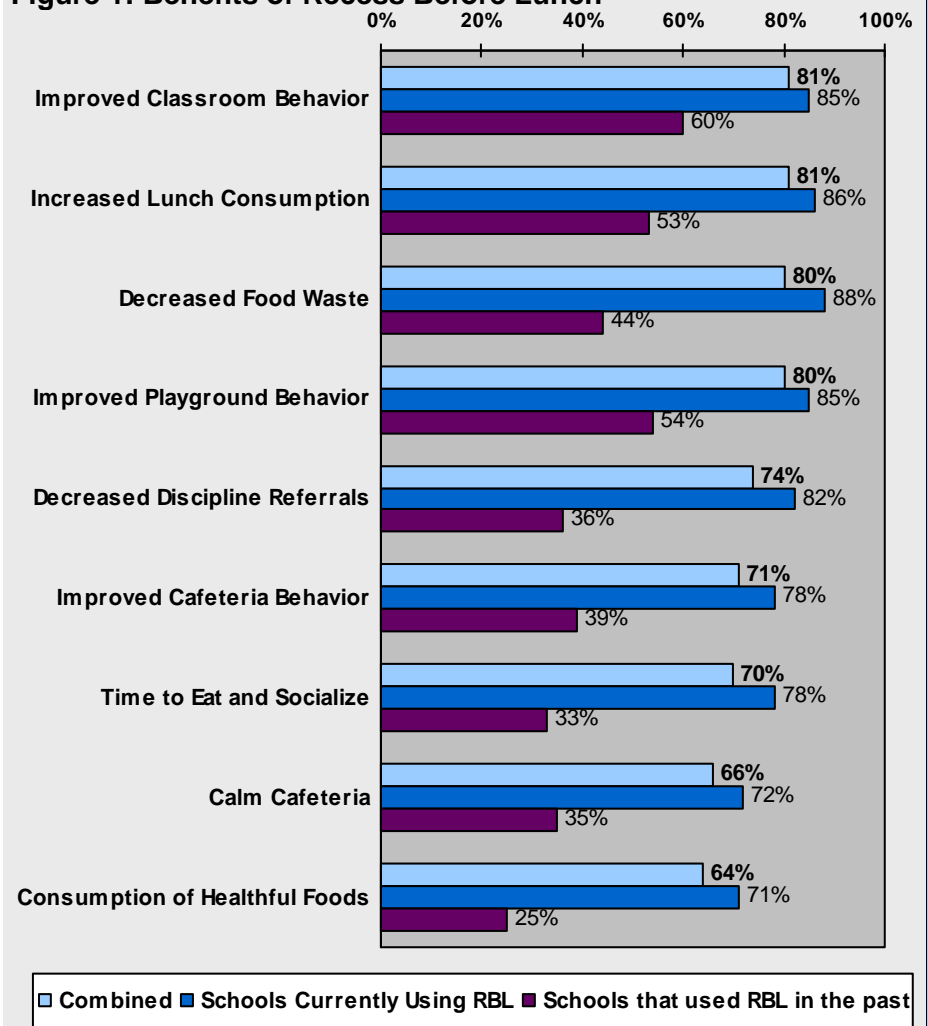
Purpose: In January 2008, a state-wide online survey was conducted to evaluate the challenges, benefits and factors essential for successful implementation of RBL. The survey was sent to all Montana private and public K-8th grade school principals. There were three main purposes for collecting the survey data: (1) to more effectively assist Montana schools in their efforts to implement an RBL schedule; (2) to share updated outcome and evaluation data with schools across the nation; and (3) to encourage inclusion of RBL as part of comprehensive school wellness policies.

Results: A total of 195 principals completed the survey, for a response rate of 30% (95±6). Almost half (47%) of the respondents reported that they were currently using an RBL schedule. Of these, 45% were using RBL with all grade levels at their schools. Sixty-one percent reported that they had used an RBL schedule for two or more years. These results are very similar to implementation rates reported nationally.

Benefits: Montana principals reported particular benefits (Figure 1) in improved student behavior (in the classroom, playground, and lunchroom), increased lunch consumption, and decreased food waste.

Continued on next page

Figure 1: Benefits of Recess Before Lunch



Challenges:

The two most commonly reported challenges (Figure 2) were: (1) revising the daily school schedule and (2) hand washing prior to eating lunch.

Obstacles experienced less often included: (1) lunchtime staffing and supervision, (2) cafeteria layout issues, (3) and staff resistance.

[Note: MTN does not recommend the use of hand sanitizer as an alternative to washing hands with soap and water.]

Factors for Success:

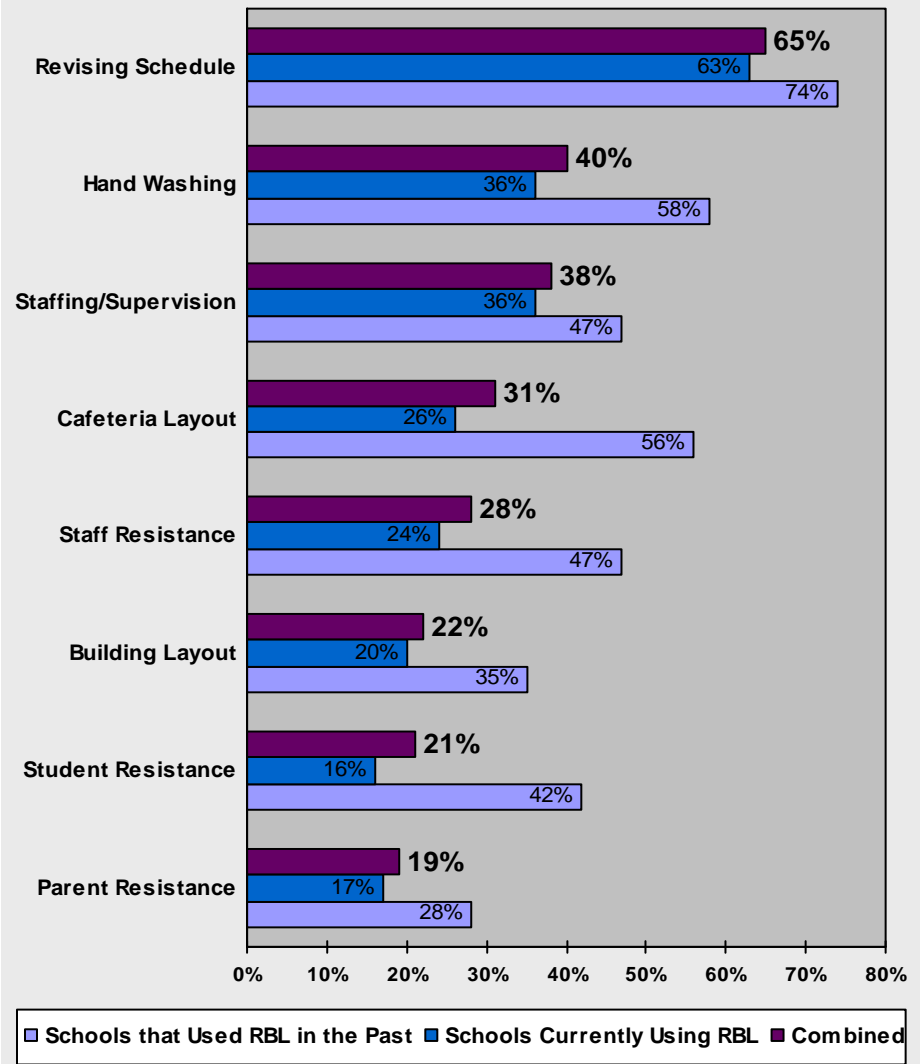
Principals reported the following factors for creating a successful RBL schedule: (1) cooperation among school staff, (2) strong administrative leadership and commitment, (3) a trial period to fine-tune the policy, and (4) the expectation that the daily school schedule will be a work in progress.

Suggestions from Principals:

Principals offered the following suggestions for successful implementation:

- Plan ahead; obtain buy in and support from school staff.
- Involve students, parents and school staff in planning efforts.
- Start with a limited pilot program or trial period – monitor and adjust as needed.
- Be prepared to address challenges before implementing RBL. Have a plan to address:
 - ⇒ hand washing;
 - ⇒ scheduling of lunch times and eating spaces;
 - ⇒ supervision issues; and
 - ⇒ cafeteria, playground and hallway flow patterns.

Figure 2: Challenges of Recess Before Lunch



Future Steps: The survey results will be used to inform school staff, parents and community members about the benefits, challenges and success factors associated with an RBL schedule. We will continue to monitor changes in the use of RBL across Montana schools. Further, this report will be disseminated broadly through publications and presentations at state/national conferences. In this way, we can foster the effective use of RBL as part of ongoing school wellness efforts throughout Montana and beyond.

For more information:

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