

# HISD's Mike Miles changes NES schedule to accommodate more recess following parent pressure

By [Anna Bauman](#), Staff writer

Updated Aug 23, 2023 2:36 p.m.



Pre-kindergarten students in Jasmine Peevy's class at Kelso Elementary School play during recess, Thursday, May 17, 2018, in Houston. Houston Independent School District administrators are making an initial recommendation that the district seek a \$1.7 billion capital projects bond vote in May 2019 that would help replace schools like Kelso. Mark Mulligan/Houston Chronicle

Houston ISD Superintendent Mike Miles announced Tuesday that he is changing the recess schedule at schools under the New Education System to allow for more unstructured playtime for kids in response to a push from parents.

All students in pre-K through fifth-grade classrooms in the 85 NES and NES-aligned schools will now have a single 30-minute recess period each day, according to the district, an increase compared to a former schedule that included two shorter breaks for the lower grades and no recess in fifth grade.

"Teachers shared that they believe these modifications will limit lost learning time and maximize high-quality instruction, and we've heard from many families that they value unstructured free play time for their students," Miles said in a statement. "We were able to make these changes without sacrificing high-quality instruction time and we believe this will enhance the environment in our schools and support student achievement."

The change marks a big win for an HISD parent advocacy group called Free Play Houston, whose members have written letters, met with administrators and orchestrated an email campaign in recent weeks in an effort to push for more recess time for NES students, pointing out that shortening recess time may stand in violation of state law and HISD board policies.

"We are overjoyed that a child's right to play will be respected and valued this school year," the organization said in a statement

Tuesday, thanking those who emailed HISD leadership about the issue. "Houstonians have long known that all children need an unstructured play time during their school day. Decades of research shows that recess not only promotes social and emotional skills that become fundamental learning tools, but that recess also benefits students by improving their memory, attention, and concentration."

Before these changes, the latest version of the NES master schedule allowed for one 15-minute recess in the morning and one 15-minute break in the afternoon for kindergarten through fourth-grade students, with no additional time built in for getting students to and from the playground, according to Brooke Longoria, co-founder of Free Play Houston and an HISD parent.

Additionally, the former schedule included no recess for fifth-grade students, with district administrators saying their physical movement needs would be met through Dyad programming like martial arts, dance and spin bikes, along with PE class.

The modification appears to be the first time the new state-appointed superintendent has responded to community pushback by changing course.

Miles has spoken publicly about recess on several occasions. He poked fun at playgrounds in a recent skit, and at a community event earlier this month, the superintendent told the audience that two teachers helped him overcome a speech impediment in first grade by giving him additional instruction during recess.

"I'm forever grateful that they did not see a kid who couldn't learn. They raised the expectations, and yes, I had to give up a recess. There was no advocate saying, 'You have to have two recesses a day' or whatever," Miles said. "They did what they needed for me, and I'm forever grateful for that."

Longoria wrote a letter to the superintendent and board of managers in late July and sent a follow-up letter to the board last Friday asking members to reconsider the recess schedule, saying it violated policy and undermined best practices surrounding kids' health and well-being.

She and other founding members of the organization met last Tuesday with Monica Zdrojewski, deputy chief of staff for Miles, who informed them that HISD planned to cut recess for fifth-grade students at schools undergoing systemic reforms.

"Under this new master schedule, thousands of fifth grade students in NES and NES-A schools will be denied access to recess, an essential component of the educational experience, as required by our board policy," Longoria wrote in her letter to the board last week. "It is the job of the board to represent the vision and values of the community. The best way to do this is through policy. Please intervene on behalf of the community and enforce local board policy."

None of the Free Play Houston founding members have children in NES or NES-aligned schools, but they said they worked to amplify voices from those communities. For example, they shared a note on

social media written by a fifth-grader at Wainwright Elementary School named Ian, who said he likes to play soccer with his friends.

"I think recess is important because if they don't get their energy out the classroom will be loud and hyper," the student wrote. "If I can't get recess I think I may get bad grades because I will have trouble concentrating. If that happens I will be sad."

[HISD recess guidelines](#) say elementary schools will provide 30 minutes of recess for all students and that recess must be separate from a physical education class. Staff cannot withhold recess from students as a form of punishment or to complete classwork or tutoring, according to the policy. The guidelines were [established more than a decade ago following parental pressure](#).

Additionally, Free Play Houston alleged that the district violated Texas Senate Bill 530 by failing to consult with the School Health Advisory Council before making changes to the recess schedule. Members of the group said they believe that a shortened recess schedule would be counterproductive to Miles' stated goal of improving academic achievement in low-performing schools. It is better to have one longer recess than two shorter recesses, according to the group, because it cuts down on transition time and gives kids enough time to be ready to settle back down in the classroom.

"There's no question that we need to be doing better, but research tells us that learning does not happen in a vacuum," said Jill Wood, a playworker and co-founder of the group, during an August

community meeting. "Reading and math and critical thinking especially are learned best by moving physically and moving in a highly motivating environment."

Research shows that recess delivers a host of cognitive, physical, social and emotional benefits for youngsters by giving kids unstructured time to rest, play, imagine, think and socialize, according to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#). It helps kids process their thoughts and emotions, engage in joyful and creative play, and learn essential social skills alongside their peers, while ultimately returning to the classroom more focused and productive. "Every child will tell you that recess is their favorite time of day," Longoria said. "This goes to their joy, to what they like about school."

Aug 22, 2023|Updated Aug 23, 2023 2:36 p.m.

By [Anna Bauman](#)

Anna Bauman is an education reporter for the Houston Chronicle covering the Houston Independent School District. She can be reached at [anna.bauman@houstonchronicle.com](mailto:anna.bauman@houstonchronicle.com). She joined the Chronicle in 2020 after covering breaking news for the San Francisco Chronicle through the Hearst Fellowship. Anna is a Kansas City native with a bachelor's degree from the University of Oklahoma.

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