



# Project LiNK:

## Taking Time Out to Improve Academic Performance

Discussions on how to impact child behaviors and health always include the role and responsibilities of schools in these efforts. Typical recommendations are to serve healthier food in school cafeterias, to limit the availability of unhealthy drinks and snacks in vending machines, and to increase the amount of required physical education (PE) time. All of these recommendations, however, come at direct costs to frequently under-resourced schools. Healthier cafeteria offerings cost more; reducing sugar-filled snacks in vending machines reduces school income; increasing PE requirements is viewed as taking time away from classroom time. Dr. Debbie Rhea and her colleagues with the LiNK Project, however, are focused on demonstrating that taking time away from the classroom – when managed well – can improve student on-task behavior, attention span, and academic performance.

The LiNK Project, developed out of Dr. Rhea's research at Texas Christian University, aims to make four recesses daily and character development curriculum in grades K through 8 the norm nationally. Just four years old, the program is already in two private and 14 public schools with diverse student populations and has demonstrated impressive results in a short time span. According to founder Debbie Rhea, across all schools, students improve at least 30 percent in terms of on-task behaviors. Writing skills advance by six to eight months in one year or less. As a specific example that will resonate with teachers, while it generally takes until the end of first grade for kids to be able to write within the lines, first graders in LiNK schools are now able to do so by October, two months into the school year. Empathy and social behaviors (eg. demonstrating the ability to think before acting) improve dramatically.

Core to the program are four 15-minute recesses involving unstructured outdoor play throughout the school day

combined with brief character development lessons four 15-minute lessons weekly. During the recesses, teachers remain outside monitoring the kids for safety purposes only; they do not provide any direction or structure to the outdoor time. In addition, teachers do not take books, cell phones or tablets outside - the idea being that the recess is an unstructured brain break for teachers, too. Once they have ascertained that students are managing themselves fairly well, they can get some activity in themselves if they so choose.

Adding recess time sounds easy on the surface. However, it requires a paradigm shift at all levels in thinking about how kids learn. Teachers in public schools long dealt with managing student time to standards such as delivering a specific number of minutes per subject of education each day, and learning being assessed via STAAR testing. Critical to the success of the LiNK programming is a shift to understanding that if teachers are required to deliver 120 minutes of English content per day, but are only getting in 90 because of the addition of recess time, they may be coming out ahead. Why? Because without recess, children are not focused and content has to be re-taught. With recess, distractions are reduced so that 90 minutes results in increased improved attention span and, therefore, learning.

Because the program's success depends on fundamentally changing the cultural belief system about education in the U.S., a key component of the LiNK Project is training. An initial three-day training spread out over three months in the spring focuses on this reframing. A refresher three-hour in-service training is delivered in the fall just before the school year begins. Recesses start the first day of the fall semester. Subsequently, LiNK team members meet with teachers and school principals for 1 to 1 ½ hours each month to touch base on concerns and provide refresher training where needed. In

addition, LiNK observation team members periodically visit participating schools to assess fidelity of lesson and recess delivery. Where issues are identified, they are addressed at the next monthly meeting.

Rhea and her team realize that, in order to change the culture of education, they must irrefutably demonstrate that the new system works. They are working on this through carrying out case-control studies. Case and control schools are matched on demographic characteristics of the student body, baseline assessment scores, number of classrooms and baseline amount of recess achieved in partnership with school district assessment teams. Comparisons are blind (i.e. participating and control schools do not know with whom they have been matched). Moreover, LiNK works with a statistician whose only role is to analyze the data collected; she is not in the schools and, thus, is not biased.

Since initially piloting the initiative, Rhea and her team have learned some valuable lessons. First is the importance of leadership support at the district and school level. This has proven so critical that one of the group's requirements for engaging with schools is that upper management (eg. superintendent, administration, curriculum development leads) buy-in and that the school principal be "fired up" to be a part of the effort as well. Concretely, principals must commit to attending the spring, fall in-service, and monthly refresher trainings. His / her role is to continually reiterate support for the changes to teachers.

A second lesson is on the importance of training timing. It is difficult to get teachers to attend a 3-day training in the summer without paying them. Thus, the initial training is spread out over three months during the spring semester. This spring training gets teachers on-board with the idea of change. However, once the semester begins, some find implementation difficult in the face of competing expectations such as delivery of a specific number of minutes per subject. Thus, the in-service and monthly refresher trainings provide support teachers need to sustain these changes.

A third lesson is that teacher personality drives how thoroughly the program is implemented. "We started seeing early on that some teachers don't run on the same schedule as everyone else. With these teachers, they felt like just getting students to recess was success. It wasn't about getting the students to recess efficiently so that time outdoors was maximized." From this learning, the team restructured its training to specifically address the different personalities of those responsible for implementing the program.

When asked what her ultimate goal is for LiNK, Rhea responds, **"In 30 years, nationally, four recesses a day will be the norm. We won't know anything different. Our kids will be happy again. They will be thriving. They won't be anxious. And our teachers will be happy, too; they won't be having breakdowns because they aren't getting to do what they thought they were going to be doing when they went into education."**

She admits that the program is in the early stages but making definite progress toward this goal. The first phase was initial launch, which took place in private schools because of lower barriers (bureaucracy) to entry. The second phase involved getting into public schools and the initiative is in the 2nd year of this. The third stage is a big one. Here a cohort of public schools will be through their third year of commitment and students who have been exposed to the change will take the STAAR test for the first time (as will their matched control schools). In addition, the program will begin to branch out nationally and will launch a train-the-trainer model in order to support this growth. A final phase will involve developing and implementing the program through eighth grade, with the middle school content changing to acknowledge the need for students to have the opportunity to engage in self-selected pursuits. What will not change as the program expands to middle school and possibly beyond is that all four recesses daily will involve unstructured outdoor play time.

### Advice for Those Working on Similar Initiatives:

- » Start small to make sure you have developed your protocol well before launching with larger sample sizes
- » Make sure you have leadership buy-in and support that is visible to teachers.
- » Consider the school year cycle and teacher schedules when developing your training and refresher touch points.
- » Measure, measure, measure – and do it well. When your goal is to accomplish a cultural shift, you need irrefutable evidence to support the impact of what you are promoting.
- » Program development is imperative. Learn from your experience, update, implement the new.