



A CALL TO ACTION:

Expand Daily Play Time in LAUSD Elementary Schools



1 in 3

LAUSD students are chronically absent

(Source: California School Dashboard)

45%



report not feeling a sense of belonging at school

(Source: LAUSD School Experience Survey / LCAP)

Protect Play. Learning Thrives.

This brief recommends that LAUSD expand and protect daily play time beyond the minimum requirement to improve student regulation, engagement, & learning outcomes.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is experiencing persistent challenges in student engagement, attendance, and school climate. Recent policy changes, including California's 30-minute recess requirement under Senate Bill 291, represent important progress. However, current structures still limit students' access to meaningful play time throughout the school day. (Source: California Senate Bill 291, 2023)

Student Engagement & School Climate

LAUSD data indicate ongoing challenges in student connection and well-being:

- Chronic absenteeism remains elevated (~30% districtwide) (California School Dashboard)
- Suspension rates are classified as very high (California School Dashboard)
- Only 58% of elementary students report feeling safe at school

(Source: LAUSD School Experience Survey / LCAP)

At the same time, typical elementary schedules include:

- One short recess period
- Limited, unprotected play during lunch
- Extended instructional blocks without breaks

These conditions contribute to student disengagement and dysregulation.

Policy & Practice

≈40%

of elementary students report feeling unsafe at school

(Source: LAUSD School Experience Survey / LCAP)

California now requires schools to provide at least 30 minutes of daily recess (SB 291).

While this establishes an important baseline, the policy:

- Does not account for transition time, reducing actual play
- Does not include lunch-based play
- Does not require distribution of play across the day

As a result, many students continue to experience insufficient opportunities for movement, social interaction, and regulation. 30 minutes establishes a floor, but not a complete model for how children learn best.

In practice, this policy remains insufficient to align with what research shows children need to learn, regulate, and engage.

30 minutes is progress. It's not enough.

Research and practice consistently show that unstructured play supports:

- Emotional regulation
- Peer connection
- Classroom engagement
- Attention and learning readiness

(See: CDC, AAP, and education research on physical activity and learning)



However, current scheduling practices concentrate instruction into long blocks with limited opportunities for reset.

Even when recess is provided, actual play time is often reduced by transitions. This creates a clear mismatch between how children learn best and how the school day is currently structured.

Policy Recommendations

LAUSD should adopt a district-wide framework that:

Expands daily play time

- Build beyond the 30-minute minimum
- Establish a target range of 45–60 minutes of total daily play

Distributes play across the day

- Provide at least two opportunities for unstructured play
- Include both recess and protected play during lunch or other periods

Ensures meaningful unstructured play time

- Account for transition time in scheduling
- Prioritize uninterrupted, student-directed play



This **GAP** is not a matter of time, it is a matter of **how time is structured.**

Implementation Considerations

- Schools can adapt schedules to incorporate additional play without reducing instructional minutes.
- Flexibility at the site level allows for context-specific solutions
- Existing recess structures can be expanded rather than replaced
- Pilot programs or phased implementation may support district-wide adoption.

LAUSD has taken an important step by establishing a minimum recess requirement. Expanding and strengthening these protections offers a practical, evidence-aligned opportunity to improve student outcomes across LAUSD. Protecting play is not an addition to the school day - it is a necessary condition for effective learning.

Sources:

California Department of Education. California School Dashboard (2024–2025).
Los Angeles Unified School District. School Experience Survey and Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP).
California Senate Bill 291 (2023).
Data reflect publicly available reporting from LAUSD and the California Department of Education.



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