Children at Swansea Elementary enjoy recess on the school's new playground equipment. Hanging with the kids is Lois Brink, a CU-Denver landscape architect who has been researching the link between playtime and both behavior and learning.

A plea for play

Researcher Lois Brink is on a mission to return recess to cash-strapped schools

By Jenny Deam
Denver Post Staff Writer

Lois Brink, considered the First Lady of Playgrounds, wants to show bean counters and school policymakers who fret over academic performance that they've got it backward. Playtime, she insists, matters.

As public schools across Denver and the state reel from the double whammy of budget cuts and pressure to improve test scores, one of the first things eliminated from a child's school day is physical activity.

According to a recent Denver Public Schools report on the state of physical education in its schools, the average time Denver students spend in elementary P.E. is between 60 and 75 minutes a week — less than half of what it was 12 years ago. And that is the average. Today some Denver grade schools, often in low- to middle-income neighborhoods, have dropped P.E. entirely, a casualty of declining funds.

Many other schools offer only once a week for a half-hour, taking advantage of the fact that Colorado remains one of only two states without a requirement for physical education. The other is South Dakota.

This comes at a time when morning or afternoon recess also is disappearing to squeeze in more study time.

"It is absolutely the last thing you should be doing," says Brink, a 30-year-old landscape architect and playground researcher. She has built a reputation by helping bring more than 30 playground installations to city schools.

It is no coincidence that Brink is the mother of two children and she finds disheartening the angst to prove a school's worth through test scores.

"I just want to scream sometimes," she says.

Instead of cutting physical activity from a child's school day, Brink insists districts should be embracing it. And, she adds, politicians should be funding it.

Her theory — time-tested by anyone who has spent an hour or more in a roomful of children — is that grade-schoolers are more focused and better behaved if given the chance to blow off some energy during the school day.

The more focused children are, Brink says, the more efficiently they
BRINK: Playtime tool for learning

Lois Brink has installed several “learning scapes” (playgrounds) at schools and is trying to prove their presence helps diminish behavioral problems among children.

“endorse the theory. Of course I do,” says Elaine Ber­man, co-chairman of the DPS Commission on School Nutri­tion and Physical Activity, which is taking aim at child­hood obesity. But she asks how a state man­date for physical education would work unless it comes with a funding commitment.

What happens instead, Ber­man says, is individual schools are left to make nearly impossi­ble choices. This is especially true in neighborhoods where parents can’t afford to fill in the money gaps with fundrais­ing and donations.

Not to­day, for ex­ample, re­cent voter initiatives declared money must be provided for music and art programs. Yet principals are ordered to slice thousands of dollars from their yearly operational budgets.

And because teacher salary and school ratings are now tied to CSAP scores, no school is go­ing to reduce the time for test­ing subjects such as math and liter­acy.

It’s small wonder, says Brink, that P.E. becomes an easy tar­get for the chopping block.

Not to­mention that many be­lieve gym and recess are not as im­portant as academic sub­jects. Or are they?

At Fairmont Elementary School in Denver’s Baker neigh­borhood, principal Melanie By­ers saw the number of suspen­sions drop from 75 to five in the three years since one of Brink’s “Learning Landscape” playground structures was in­stalled.

Before, at her school with more than 85 percent of its stu­dents eligible for reduced or free lunches, there was no play­ground, only a dirt field, chipped blacktop and a few an­cient iron rings.

The high number of suspen­sions came from outdoor fights, which Byers attributes, at least in part, to children hav­ing nothing to do.

This school year, Fairmont dropped its P.E. program when faced with budget cuts: Byers thought she could save money by not paying a gym teacher.

Next year, she vows to get it back. What she noticed most this year was a lack of social skills and camaraderie among students. She can’t help but won­der if it comes from not hav­ing a gym class to learn strat­egy and teamwork.

Byers wants to host a field day this spring, so each day at lunchtime recess she works with small groups of kids, teaching them how to toss a softball or navigate the long jump. Without gym class, she says many of her students have no concept of track and field.

At Swansea Elementary, with its playground in the shadow of the Interstate 70 overpass, principal Mary Sours says her students benefit from playtime.

“I will always have fewer of­fice referrals on an outside day than an inside day,” she says of weather that keeps children indoors.

From that, she says, you can draw a straight line to learning. “Active bodies,” Sours says, “means active minds.”

Staff writer Jenny Deam can be reached at 303-820-1261 or jdeam@denverpost.com.

Less exercise

During the past 12 years, Denver Public Schools elementary physical education time has decreased by an average of 40 minutes per week. The National Association of Sport and Physical Education recommends 150 minutes per week.

< CONTINUED FROM 1F

learn. And the more efficiently they learn, the better they per­form on tests.

Think of it as swing sets in the Time of CSAP.

Late last year, Brink, who is an associate professor at the University of Colorado at Den­ver, received a $150,000 Robert Wood Johnson foundation grant to study correlation in Denver schools between physical activity and behavior and social skills.

She hopes to take her re­search a step further and deter­mine what effects physical ac­tivity has on academic per­formance.

This kind of research is start­ing to emerge around the coun­try. Both in California and Illi­nois, recent studies have shown a direct link between higher academic achievement and physical activity.

“How many adults go abso­lutely nuts sitting still for an hour in a meeting? And yet we expect kids to sit for three hours straight?” asks Paula Keyes Kun, director of commu­nications for the National Asso­ciation for Sport and Physical Education.

New schools in some parts of the country are being built without playgrounds. Recess is re­garded as expendable, she says. Still, there are no clear vil­lains or easy answers.