

Playground politics

WILL DODDS

student columnist

The story of America's war on childhood obesity has taken a new, unbelievable twist. Its latest casualty: recess.

Due to ever-growing concerns about health and lifestyle habits in the United States, elementary and middle schools across the country are revolutionizing the role of recess by adopting organized recess programs. Multiple non-profit organizations have been formed in recent years to run structured recess programs that encourage, and force, kids to get involved in recess.

One organization, California-based Playworks, has already replaced recess at 170 low-income area schools in nine cities with mandatory games and activities for students.

Well, Playworks sounds about as rad as the idea of summer camp. And kids aren't fooled by Playworks' fun-filled Web sites either. They know behind all the bright colors and photoshopped smiles are recess fascists who are making them play Four Square when they could be digging for worms.

At the hundreds of schools infiltrated by these programs, recess is now just another class.

Back in the day, recess was the staple that held the school day together. Looking forward to it pushed kids through the morning, and after recess,

they knew school was almost over. It was a break from reality, much like a college kid's cigarette break.

Recess gave everybody a time to go do their thing and feel good about themselves during a long school day. It was a time to show off for girls, trade Pokémon cards, hustle snacks or hide in the corner and play Game Boy.

Recess is legendary; we even watched a TV show about it on Saturday mornings.

A day at school is difficult for kids, and recess used to give them hope and friends. Now it's just a way for educators to promote good health, which could make kids feel bad about themselves.

One recess "coach," Brandi Parker, makes \$14 an hour in New Jersey to drill 8-year-olds around orange cones in the school parking lot every day after lunch, according to an article in *The New York Times*. These coaches, however, forget that not every kid finds the same joy in games and running as they do relaxing on their recess break.

It's too bad for the kids who have no hand-eye coordination or who like to play imaginary games.

Principals in schools that have implemented the recess regimen support the program since it almost eliminates playground injuries, such as nosebleeds or black eyes.

But these minor injuries



BRAD MOROCCO/PHOTO EDITOR

gave kids playground credibility. The arrival of organized recess programs eliminates an entire society in which kids can establish their school-wide identities.

Doctors also argue that recess is a crucial asset to child development, not only physically, but also socially and intellectually. Without a doubt, recess is a time for freedom of spirit and refreshes a child's mind for the latter half of the day.

Playworks agrees. According to their Web site, they believe that "play is essential to child development ... and quality recess and playtime also helps children return to the classroom more focused and ready to learn." But their notion of a coached recess prohibits any sort of individual self-development.

Backers of organized recess also claim that their strategy

discourages behavior problems on the playground. Well, sure; it postpones conflict at school to after-school hours, outside school grounds, where there is less supervision — especially at inner-city schools, which Playworks targets. Many students at these schools walk to and from school, which would give them a perfect opportunity to get in trouble.

Although Playworks' intentions are good, recess just cannot be coached. An organized, mandatory recess program violates the laws of tradition. And more importantly, kids just need a chance to exhale in the middle of a rough day at school.

C'mon, teacher, leave those kids alone.

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An American in Paris

DANIEL CONNOR

student columnist

This past spring break, I traveled abroad, but not to over-visited spring break beaches and tropical resorts. Instead, I visited Paris.

Before I went, people told me different things about the city: the people are rude, it's dangerous and the food isn't good, just to name a few. But I had a different experience. There are definitely a lot of differences between the United States and France. The biggest difference for me was the food.

I'm a regular ol' American, and I love to eat hotdogs and hamburgers, but don't expect to find this kind of food in France. Instead, they eat a lot of baguettes. Bread in general is a staple in France. Everyday, multiple times a day, I had some form of bread, whether it was a croissant or a sandwich.

If a hankering for a scrumptious hamburger or any kind of traditional "American" food overtakes your stomach while

in France, expect a hefty price tag. It's about 26 American dollars to purchase a hamburger. No wonder I only had one hamburger my week in France. Their own sandwiches are more common and less expensive.

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The French also satisfy their sweet-tooth differently. As soon as I hit the Parisian sidewalks, I found a delectable little treat called Kinder Surprises.

As an American, half the surprise is

opening one. Upon opening this chocolate egg, I found a small yellow casing with a toy inside. The toys range from boats to catapults to miniature figurines.

It's too bad they're banned in the United States. Apparently, the toys contain small parts, which are listed as a choking hazard.

Some travelers have had negative experiences with local Parisians, but I found them to be friendly. An American with a slight ability to speak French will mostly be greeted with smiles.

At one point, a French saleswoman trudged through my anglicized French to help me find a book about pointillism. Contrary to the horror stories, the woman was nice enough, although in the end she didn't have what I was looking for.

I also found myself lost in Montmartre in the northern part of France.

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The deadly minerals

DAVE RICHIE

student columnist

A war fueled by greed and the exploitation of four main minerals found in all our cell phones, laptops and iPods is decimating Eastern Congo. Most people are unaware of the connection between their electronics and the fighting in Congo, but the choices they make every day have a very real and immediate impact on people thousands of miles away.

Eastern Congo is the deadliest place on the planet right now, with more than 5.8 million people killed in the past 15 years. Despite elections in 2006 and the presence of the world's largest UN peacekeeping force, the Congo continues to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world.

The Congo's extensive natural resources allowed rebel groups to bring in upwards of \$180 million annually through their strong-armed control of the country's mines, which produce tin, tungsten, tantalum and gold. With the profits, rebel groups purchase more weapons and continue the cycle of brutality and violence.

The violence and exploitation in the Congo most directly affects women and girls. The ongoing war is known as the "war against women," where females aged from three to 83 are routinely raped and mutilated on an unbelievably massive scale.

Young girls and women are kidnapped and taken from their villages where they are repeatedly gang-raped, held as sex slaves and have their reproductive organs mutilated. Their husbands, families and villages routinely shun those who have been raped, and these women do not always have access to rudimentary medical facilities for wounds that can require extensive surgery and rehabilitation.

The House of Representatives is currently considering a new bill, The Conflict Mineral Trade Act (HR 4128), which would work towards increased transparency in mineral trade and the establishment of a system to audit mines. The Congo does not receive nearly enough public attention, and if we expect lawmakers to take the issue seriously and work towards enacting lasting change, we must make our voices heard.

Although the Congo is an ocean away, the people there deserve our interest. A Mende proverb says, "The stranger who tells us stories when we cannot speak not only awakens our spirits and hearts but also shows our humanity — which others want to forget — and in doing so, becomes family." We have a universal duty as global citizens to become educated and to raise our voices when human rights violations occur anywhere.

By purchasing cell phones and laptops made with minerals mined from the region, we are contributing to the continued violence in the Congo and the perpetuation of a war directed against women. Duquesne Amnesty International and the Pittsburgh Human Rights Network are hosting the 2010 Human Rights Arts Festival on March 31, from 6 to 10 p.m. in the Union Ballroom, to raise money for the Congo.

As entire towns are destroyed and generations of Congolese women and men face uncertain futures, we must act now to urge our representatives to take HR 4128 seriously. Lives depend on it.

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