

# Give us a break! Students with energy to burn often kept on a tight rein in schools

Yang Jian

Ten-minute breaks between classes — a time for students to stretch their legs, have a chat and briefly escape the confines of the classroom — have disappeared in many Chinese primary and middle schools due to safety concerns.

Some parents and students have reported that schools restrict students from leaving classrooms during breaks, prohibit loud talking, ban physical activities and penalize those who violate these rules.

According to Ding Ding, a second-grader from a Beijing primary school, he and his classmates are allowed during breaks to go out to the restroom or get a drink of water, or to play in the classroom as long as they don't run or make noise.

Violating these rules can result in deductions in good behavior points. A classmate of Ding's lost more than 20 points for running in the hallway.

"School life has become increasingly hard," Ding told China News Service, adding that classes now seem to stretch out longer and the time between classes seems to get shorter.

A recent survey by China Youth Daily revealed that three quarters of parents said "quiet 10-minute breaks" in schools are now widespread, particularly in

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Simply sacrificing the 10-minute break between classes to ensure safety is not worth it.

Liu Zhihui

Deputy dean of the Law School of China University of Political Science and Law

primary schools.

Respondents expressed concern about this trend, saying students need to be given more free rein during breaks. Activities, they said, help prevent eye strain and obesity.

Teachers, on the other hand, express caution.

Zhang Yan, a primary-school teacher in east China's Shandong Province, said some parents are quick to blame the school for any accidents involving their children. This creates pressure on teachers, who in turn want to confine students to classrooms to make sure no one gets hurt, according to a China

News Service report.

Similar restrictions have been reported in the provinces of Hebei and Guizhou, where students were barred from going to the playground during small recesses.

In a primary school in the city of Langfang in Hebei, most students couldn't do much but chat quietly during breaks, and in the city of Zunyi in Guizhou, teachers didn't allow students to leave the classroom. Some schools have even assigned class teachers to monitor students during breaks, ensuring that they stay seated, according to Xinhua news agency.

Safety issues loom large. Recent media reports found that more than 90 percent of school injury cases occurred during recess or after school, with most taking place on the playground or in classrooms. Schools were found to bear over 30 percent of the responsibility in more than half of these cases.

Limited space in urban schools is another contributing factor. Narrow hallways and congested elevators make it difficult for students to move around very quickly during a 10-minute recess.

Chu Zhaohui, a researcher at the Chinese National Institute of Education Sciences, observed that shortages of teachers and growing numbers of

students also contribute to the break restrictions.

In 2023, new student enrollment in Chinese primary schools peaked at about 20 million. In one primary school in the city of Nanjing in Jiangsu Province, there are now 10 classes in the first grade and over 2,400 students across six grades — all managed by just more than 100 teachers.

It all boils down to balancing the natural rambunctious nature of children with the disquiet of teachers. The opinions of many parents and education experts tilt toward the students.

"To prevent incidents and trouble, schools opt for a blanket policy of keeping all children still and quiet, which can be viewed as laziness on the schools' part," said Zhi Zhenfeng, an Institute of Law researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Zhi said classroom study for 45 minutes straight can fatigue a child's eyes, body and mind. Children, unlike adults, have limited attention spans and more energy to burn. For them, taking a break outside the classroom can enhance the efficiency of their studies, he said.

Psychologists argue that a bit of physical activity between classes helps alleviate academic pressure and promotes healthy social interaction.



Left: Students are let out for a frolic between classes at a primary school in Shandong Province.

Below: Students learn tai chi with fans during class breaks at a school in Sichuan Province.

