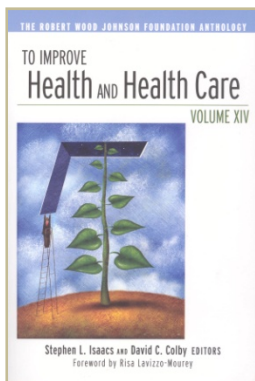


# Playworks/Sports4Kids

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## ***Editors' Introduction***

Good ideas emerge from all kinds of unexpected places. In this chapter, Carolyn Newbergh, a California-based freelance journalist who has contributed many chapters to the *Anthology* series, tells the story of a promising program that emerged from a conversation between an activist trying to raise money for a children's art museum and an Oakland elementary school principal who, concerned about making recess less unruly, asked why nobody was doing anything about bringing play back onto the playground. Activist Jill Violet took the question as a challenge, and from it she developed the idea of Playworks—originally called Sports4Kids. Playworks brings young adults, many of them AmeriCorps volunteers, to schools in low-income urban communities, where they organize and oversee recess periods and sometimes after-school activities. The idea behind Playworks, as Violet expresses it, is to bring play back into the lives of America's children. With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Sports4Kids expanded from a pilot project in a handful of San Francisco Bay Area schools to a national program, Playworks, that has received nearly universal accolades from students, teachers, parents, and the media.

There is, however, a cloud on the horizon: whether a program such as this—which benefits disadvantaged children and generates tremendous enthusiasm in most places it is tried—is affordable in hard economic times. School districts throughout the nation are being forced to make the difficult decision about whether to spend the more than \$20,000 a year this program costs them. In this regard, the chapter on Playworks/Sports4Kids is more than the story of a program that provides supervised play for vulnerable school children. It is also a case study of the challenges inherent in sustaining programs, even ones acknowledged to have great promise.

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Not long ago, the playground at Manzanita Community School in Oakland was emblematic of all that has gone wrong with recess in the United States, especially in low-income neighborhoods. Because of concerns about lawsuits, monkey bars and other play structures had been removed. Meanwhile, much of the play equipment, from the jump ropes to the hula hoops, had gone missing. Students faced a sea of blacktop when they headed out to recess. They knew how to do only a few things—kick a ball as far as they could and hope someone might kick it back, punch a tetherball, or pile onto the lone play structure and elbow and shove one another as they climbed or sat on it. It was aimless play, and only a fraction of the students joined in. Mostly they fought over who could use the ball, called names, bullied, gossiped, pushed, and shoved. Many of the pupils, especially the girls, clung to the sidelines, with no interest in participating in the chaotic and often intimidating scene. Injuries on the playground were common, and bad behavior led to disciplinary referrals to the principal and to suspensions.

Each day, the students at this elementary school would return to class from recess riled up, distracted, and unable to concentrate. Teachers wasted precious learning time calming the children down. The tone of the school was “like the wild West,” with children willfully walking out of classrooms when they felt like it, slamming doors, and toting BB guns to school, said Eyana Spencer, the school’s principal.

Beginning in the 2005–2006 school year, Manzanita introduced a new approach to managing recess, outsourcing it to Sports4Kids, a nonprofit Oakland-based program that took the name Playworks in 2009. A high-energy young coach taught the schoolchildren how to play a range of basic childhood games they either didn’t know the rules for or had never learned, such as hopscotch, four square, double Dutch jump rope, kickball, switch, and much more. The emphasis was on having fun, not playing to win at all costs—and on including everyone. The

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coach, a young, college-educated adult brimming with enthusiasm, became the star of the playground, orchestrating activities at various stations on the blacktop during recess and lunch, teaching new games to the children in their classrooms, and overseeing after-school activities and leagues. He also gave the children a tool for resolving conflicts by themselves rather than in response to a teacher's angry commands, using the old children's hand game of rock-paper-scissors, which is also called *roshambo*. The school paid Sports4Kids \$23,500 a year for the program, and Sports4Kids picked up the rest of the \$55,000 to \$60,000 tab.

On a recent autumn day, the students bounded onto the blacktop, running to various stations in the play yard. At the jump rope section, the rope circled round and round to the old standard jingle, "Ice cream soda, cherry on the top, who's your boyfriend? I forgot." Shrieks of laughter filled the air as others on the playground played dodgeball, basketball, and four square. Some children waited in line to check out equipment from *junior coaches*—older students the Playworks coach had chosen to be peer leaders on the playground.

Suddenly a dispute erupted. A child who was up next to turn the rope walked away, and the children angrily yelled at him, "You have to tell us you're leaving, because it was your turn." Quickly, the Sports4Kids coach, Jared Crayton-Thomas, explained that rule and reminded the children to use rock-paper-scissors to resolve the disagreement. A few moments later, the boy picked up the rope and joined in the fun. Tranquility was restored.

"It's nothing short of amazing," said Haydee Jimenez, who has had three children at the school, one of them a former junior coach. "All this order and good behavior and respect—it wasn't anything like this a couple of years ago. Oh, my goodness, there used to be a lot of fights and bullies."

Manzanita, a long-troubled school that was reconstituted in 2005 to improve the learning environment, has seen remarkable results from Playworks, said principal Spencer, who handpicked its teachers and insisted that Sports4Kids be invited in. Since then, suspensions

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have dropped, test scores have edged up some, and teachers report that they no longer lose a major chunk of class time to the spillover of unhappiness from recess. The students treat one another and their teachers with more respect, and the tone of the campus has improved, she said.

“The climate of our school changed with Sports4Kids, because there is another caring adult on campus who can help the kids and keep the playground safe for them,” Spencer says. “Jared motivates the kids, engages with them, and the kids have fun together. It helps children to have a good connection with someone they play with when they’re a partner with that person later in the day in math.”

## The Decline of Recess and Play

Sports4Kids, now Playworks, started out in 1996 as the brainchild of Jill Vialet, a woman who is often called a visionary. She took a principal’s off-the-cuff cry for help with recess and has turned its solution into a national movement, with the help of a \$29 million investment by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that has propelled the organization’s expansion.

Vialet built the nonprofit program in eighty San Francisco Bay Area schools, bringing “safe and healthy” play to 32,000 children for ten years, and then, together with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, set in motion a plan to expand the program to 650 schools in twenty-seven cities—directly reaching 260,000 children and indirectly touching thousands more through its training and technical assistance. With support from the Foundation, Sports4Kids set out to lead a movement to recognize, at a time when play and recess are shortchanged in favor of efforts to improve academic performance, that play and recess have a critical role in child development and must be part of every child’s school day.

“The case for creative and constructive play is a compelling one,” said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, president and chief executive officer of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “It’s good for kids’ development of social skills and learning how to mediate differences and how to learn to make rules that they can live by and play by. It has the added benefit of being absolutely

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consistent with one of our key strategic objectives, to reverse childhood obesity. Over time, kids have to get more physically active, and one of the untapped times for that is recess. When you put all of those things together, it is compelling to try to fix the lack of opportunity many kids have to play.”

The urgency behind the push for a movement stemmed from the downward spiral of both recess and play, especially in low-income and minority urban communities. Nationwide, recess has been getting shorter or eliminated as schools focus on bringing up math, reading, and science test scores under federal No Child Left Behind mandates and struggle with mounting financial pressures. The National Parent Teacher Association stated in 2006 that “nearly 40 percent of American elementary schools have either eliminated or are considering eliminating recess.”<sup>1</sup> The Center for Public Education, an initiative of the National School Boards Association, found in a 2007 survey that 20 percent of school districts had reduced the time they allocated for recess in response to No Child Left Behind.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, although many states require schools to provide a minimum amount of physical activity, most do not monitor whether the stretched-thin schools comply.

Olga Jarrett, a recess advocate and researcher who is an associate professor of early childhood education at Georgia State University, found in a study on fourth graders that they were “more fidgety and less on task” on days they did not have recess.<sup>3</sup> “They had less focus in terms of making eye contact with a teacher, working with a classmate on a project, reading, or filling out a worksheet,” said Jarrett, who is also president of the American Association for the Child’s Right to Play. “They were less apt to be doing what they were supposed to be doing when they didn’t have recess.”

Recess would not be so critical if children were getting enough play time outside of school, but many factors have conspired to reduce the opportunities for normal childhood physical play. What kids used to pick up by apparent osmosis from older siblings or neighborhood kids is no longer so common in childhood. In the old days, children returned home after school and drew a hopscotch grid on their driveway or sidewalk or flew out of their front doors to ride

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bikes with friends in the neighborhood. Now busy working parents tell their kids to stay inside at home after school. There is little of the merry sound of kids bouncing balls, skipping rope, or playing four square during the afternoon in low-income urban neighborhoods. Too many children are indoors watching TV or playing video games—sedentary, individual pursuits with little social interaction or physical movement—and that feeds the childhood obesity epidemic. Children from low-income families face other barriers to leading active lifestyles. They cannot, for example, afford to join after-school sports leagues or to take ballet, martial arts, or other enriching lessons. Meanwhile, in the inner cities, they may be exposed to violence, shootings, and drug dealing while peeking out the living room curtains, afraid to go outside.

“Child’s play” may sound frivolous and unimportant, but experts say it is anything but—that play matters and must be taken seriously. Without it, children don’t develop important skills they will need throughout life. A 2007 American Academy of Pediatrics report described play as “essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth.” Play is “important to healthy brain development” and should be integrated into the academic day, the report said. Play “ensures that the school setting attends to the social and emotional development of children as well as their cognitive development. It has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting, and even to enhance children’s learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills.”<sup>4</sup> A 2009 Yeshiva University study of 11,000 third graders concluded that giving children a recess break of at least fifteen minutes a day improved their behavior and left them more likely to learn.<sup>5</sup>

## The Result of a Casual Conversation

Playworks sprang from a casual conversation in 1995. Seated on one of those short elementary school chairs, Vialet was waiting to speak to an Oakland school principal, Margaret Peyton, about a children’s art museum Vialet had founded. Three fifth-grade boys who had fought during recess trudged out of Peyton’s office, tails between their legs. While meeting with Vialet, the principal praised the museum but lamented that she had her hands full with kids who misbehave during recess. “She said that these were not bad kids but they’re starting to believe

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they're bad kids," Violet recalled. "She was so agitated and said, 'Can't you do something about this?'"

Peyton's distress planted a seed in Violet, who thought back to her own childhood in Washington, D.C. A sports-loving kid, Violet tended to be the only girl who wanted to play some games—but the boys often wouldn't let her participate. It took the intervention and advocacy of the playground coordinator from the local parks and recreation department, whom she refers to as Clarence, to break down barriers for her to play. She wondered if what was missing on school playgrounds today was a Clarence—someone to watch out for the kids, smooth out the discord, and show them how to have fun.

Violet decided to try an experiment at Columbus [now Rosa Parks] and Cragmont elementary schools in Berkeley, hiring and training a part-time site coordinator who would act as a game supervisor and coach to teach kids the how-to's and rules of games like four square and dodgeball. The coordinator taught that the goal of play was not to vanquish your opponent but to have fun and play cooperatively. No one was to be left out of the games. "We wanted a culture in which you didn't want to crush the other side—rather, you wanted the other side to want to play with you," Violet said. "If it's not fun for everyone, they wouldn't play." The site coordinators didn't just oversee the playground but played the games alongside the children and encouraged teachers to join in also. This way, kids could observe their teachers having fun, too, and teachers could see their pupils in a different light.

The Berkeley Public Education Foundation, a private nonprofit that supported the schools, contributed \$5,000 to the experiment. "The kids responded so well," said Mary Friedman, who headed the fund at the time. "Children love structure and being told what to do, particularly when it's fun and it's on the playground. It takes away that free-floating anxiety of not knowing what to do. We had lots of happy faces."

It was quickly clear that Violet was on to something, and in the second year the program expanded to five schools in Oakland, with financial support from the private Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund and the citizen-supported Oakland Fund for Children and Youth. It

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opened its offices in a converted warehouse in downtown Oakland and began employing full-time coaches and choosing junior coaches from among the older school children to pitch in as peer leaders—teaching games, resolving disputes, and checking out equipment. The junior coaches were either some of the more responsible, high-achieving students or some of those who were struggling but might benefit from being given responsibility and higher expectations. Rock-paper-scissors would be key to resolving conflicts, giving children a tool that allowed them to move on from disagreement. “Rock-paper-scissors is a strategy to solve any conflict, every time,” said Vialet, a Harvard graduate who played rugby while in college. “Kids are able to move on. They want to keep playing, and this gives them a strategy to keep playing.”

In its third year, the organization continued to expand, and it also gave the site coordinators the task of leading an after-school program. By increasing the responsibilities of the coach position, the program was able to offer coaches full-time jobs with health insurance. After school, coaches oversaw homework help, a healthy snack, and sports and games until 5:00 p.m. In an effort to encourage girls to participate in sports, Sports4Kids started an interscholastic athletic league for girls in fourth and fifth grades.

In 2002, Sports4Kids began a partnership with the California branch of AmeriCorps, the national youth service program, which provided a pipeline of idealistic, energetic young volunteers fresh out of college, along with substantial financial assistance and stability.

As it expanded to eighty schools in the San Francisco Bay Area during its first ten years, much about this program was fine-tuned. Sports4Kids tried different approaches to calculating a fee, arriving at \$23,500 per school annually—about half the cost of a first-year teacher’s salary. This covered 40 percent of the program’s cost, and Sports4Kids picked up the remaining 60 percent in each city through grants from foundations, government support, and contributions from private donors. Each school had its own coach, who was on-site all day to run recess, meet with each classroom regularly to teach games, and oversee junior coaches and the after-school program. The organization developed a rigorous training program on games and managing conflict and developed extensive curriculum materials so that coaches were well prepared when



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they hit the blacktop. The program documented its approaches to assure consistency and see that new staff members wouldn't have to reinvent the wheel.

By 2005, this feisty organization (many in the Oakland office wore shorts to work) with a \$2.94 million annual budget was ready to move beyond the San Francisco Bay Area. In the spring of that year, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation approached Vialet with the idea of expanding Sports4Kids to schools in low-income communities throughout the country. While negotiations were proceeding, Sports4Kids ventured into Baltimore, where some school principals had been clamoring for the program. “What we were doing locally was resonating nationally, we discovered,” Vialet said. “When Baltimore took off, we thought that there was clearly demand everywhere.”

### The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Gets Involved

Vialet and Sports4Kids had come to the Foundation's attention through Bill Drayton, a man who pioneered the concept of *social entrepreneurs*—innovators who bring solutions to pressing social problems through transformative change. Drayton founded Ashoka, an international organization that supports social entrepreneurs; Vialet was an Ashoka Fellow in 2004. Invited to speak to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Drayton suggested Vialet's Sports4Kids as a good fit for the Foundation because of its commitment to eliminating childhood obesity. “We predicted she would change the pattern [of physical activity at schools] across the country at least,” Drayton said in an interview. “Now it's five years later and I think it's pretty clear that she is going to do that.”

As part of its Vulnerable Populations portfolio of grants, the Foundation approached Sports4Kids about expanding. “We were looking at the time for innovative community-based models that could be scaled up and replicated,” said Nancy Barrant, the Foundation's special adviser for program development. The idea was to bring to more children a program that would improve their well-being, promote their physical activity, and enhance their learning environment. It was not envisioned as an obesity-prevention program per se, although any

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venture that increased exercise among children would certainly help reduce obesity.

The Foundation asked Violet to think about what it would take to expand the program across the country. She and the Foundation arrived at a plan to continue the program's expansion in Baltimore and replicate it in Boston and Washington, D.C., under a three-year \$4.4 million grant that would run through June 2008. The grant would help cover Sports4Kids' share of expenses for expanding to about sixty new schools and the costs of building a national office staff in Oakland to support the larger operation. As a result, \$400,000 was earmarked for communications.

Barrand recalls the program as a fairly easy sell at the Foundation. "This is all about how to use the power of play, the leverage of play, the momentum behind the fact that children like to play to accomplish certain goals—to increase physical activity, learn rules, learn conflict resolution, be better able to sit in class and focus more," she said. "It was a very different approach, perhaps accomplishing things more directly than other programs of ours."

The partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation started in 2005. In community organizer mode, Violet set out, armed with research on who the local star principals were, the ones interested in trying innovative programs and taking risks. She would drop in on them unannounced, talk up the program, and explore their ability to use federal Title I funds to cover the school's portion of the cost, which most were able to do. (Funding from Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is available to schools with low-achieving students living in high-poverty areas.) Sports4Kids would perform a one-week demonstration for the schools on how the program worked and on what it could do for them. Nearly always, the principals, teachers, and kids were dazzled by the infusion of energy, discipline, and fun.

The Robert Wood Johnson funding not only covered much of the cost of expanding but also acted as a stamp of legitimacy that attracted potential donors in the three cities, opening doors to establish relationships critical to raising the additional money the program needed. It helped Sports4Kids attain important support from the national AmeriCorps and from local AmeriCorps organizations in the states beginning in 2007. By 2009, AmeriCorps accounted for

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10 percent of the Sports4Kids annual budget.

Sports4Kids played out in the three new cities as it had in Northern California. Teachers, principals, and parents were thrilled that the horror time of recess was now transformed to a period that was orderly and fun, and the school's learning atmosphere improved. "There was a lot of word of mouth, people talking about schools that had it, and I wanted in," said Mary Donnelly, principal of John Ruhrah Elementary in Baltimore. "It was a really nice program—the kids and the principals loved it. I loved seeing everyone engaged."

Eileen Nash, a principal for two Boston schools, observed remarkable changes on the campuses, noting that the junior coach piece of the program encouraged some troublemaking kids to straighten out. "A couple of tough kids became junior coaches," she said. "The kids live and die to wear the purple T-shirts of the junior coach. They got to succeed and feel really good about helping the younger kids with four square. It is amazing to see what it does for these kids' self esteem."

And at Washington, D.C.'s Brookland Education Campus @ Bunker Hill, principal Donna Pressley watched in wonder as the play yard that had seemed impossible to organize became orderly. "Recess has become popular again," Pressley said. "It translates wonderfully in the classroom, and has helped our overall school climate. Now nobody wants to lose time playing, so they make sure to cooperate and work hard."

### Assessing the Program

The expansion into Boston brought with it an unanticipated benefit—a Harvard Graduate School of Education program studied the impact that Sports4Kids had on one of the local schools, William H. Ohrenberger Elementary in West Roxbury, during the 2006–2007 school year. The report, titled *Evaluation Report: Case Study of the First Year of Sports4Kids at the Ohrenberger Elementary School*, confirmed what principals, teachers, and parents had been saying for years. The report concluded, "Sports4Kids helped youth to feel safe on the playground and in the classroom. In addition, we saw some evidence that Sports4Kids contributed to a more

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positive academic environment for youth. Specifically, when youth have a productive outlet for their physical energy, they are better able to focus in the classroom, which in turn promotes better academic performance. While this alone is unlikely to translate into higher test scores or better grades, Sports4Kids may be one factor that contributes to improved academic performance.”<sup>6</sup>

A report by the University of California, Berkeley, *Sports4Kids Cumulative Report*, on the program in ten Bay Area schools during the 2007–2008 school year reached similar positive conclusions. The number of children who were overweight declined 1 percent, and there was a 13 percent improvement in aerobic capacity among fifth graders. Both changes were statistically significant.<sup>7</sup> The students largely enjoyed the program. In the one-third of schools in which students were less engaged in the program, the study’s authors suggested this may be explained by how Sports4Kids was implemented in those schools, by particular “student characteristics” in the schools, or by other variables. “The improvements seen in students’ weight status and fitness suggest that Sports4Kids has a positive impact on student health outcomes through increased opportunities for meaningful play,” wrote the authors.

At the same time, individual schools reported that Sports4Kids was indeed improving student behavior. For example, a San Jose principal noted that suspensions had declined from forty-one to fourteen in the year since the program began. “While I can’t say that adding Sports4Kids is the sole reason, the impact that organized games and responsible behavior toward one another has on our students is evident,” wrote Lisa Marie Gonzalez, principal of the Bachrodt Academy.

Meanwhile, Sports4Kids received generally glowing news coverage. For example, in a story headlined “Program Helps City Kids Learn to be Good Sports: Conflict Resolution Plan Seen as Factor in Lowering Suspensions,” Debbie D. Thomas, principal of Medfield Heights Elementary in Baltimore, told *The Baltimore Sun*, “We had some students who were very explosive. But they have calmed down. I’ve seen the difference.” And a Sun editorial praised Sports4Kids: “One model program, in use at 11 Baltimore schools, has shown that fitness and

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play can be provided at a reasonable cost, with minimum equipment. . . . It's a good way to allow kids to let off steam, have some fun and get some exercise—all at the same time.”

## Growing Pains

But Sports4Kids also found that expansion came with growing pains, that there were challenges both expected and unexpected, and that adjustments would need to be made as lessons were learned. The program ran into serious cash flow problems, because the \$1.5 million line of credit that had been adequate for covering expenses while Sports4Kids waited for schools to make their fee payments was insufficient once the number of schools served grew. (Schools typically pay fees monthly, and when schools were in arrears, Sports4Kids had to carry the costs until they paid.) In 2007, cash flow reached a crisis point, sending the program scrambling until it found a savior, a Texas donor who provided an additional line of credit. Even so, it was a time of high anxiety.

The expansion created turmoil and rebellion within the informal and committed Sports4Kids culture, with many staff and board members concerned the organization was losing its soul and distrustful of Violet and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. These dissenters felt the expansion was being driven by the Foundation and questioned whether the program should be growing beyond its original scope at all. The upshot was that many of those who disagreed with the new direction left.

The move beyond the Bay Area, with all of its needs for increased staffing and support, also revealed that this scrappy organization—which had tended to promote from within—lacked some of the expertise needed to handle the complexity of running a large organization. Many longtime employees were wearing multiple hats and some of them did not have the skills needed for their new roles. As a result, Sports4Kids created new positions and recruited people to handle human resources, information technology, quality, and finances.

The program also found that its directors in the three East Coast cities needed more support, and area director and officer manager positions were added. It was no longer enough for one

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person to function alone in each city as Vialet had done in the beginning in Oakland. What's more, the role of Vialet herself, who was overextended, was narrowed, and in 2008, Sports4Kids hired an executive director, David Rothenberg, to manage the organization's daily operations. Vialet remained as president, acting as the strategic leader, national spokesperson, and leading national fundraiser.

## Expanding Nationwide

In 2008, with the program in place at 131 schools, Sports4Kids, with Robert Wood Johnson Foundation support, took the program to scale. A four-year \$24 million grant enabled Sports4Kids to serve 260,000 children at 650 schools in twenty-seven cities and to serve thousands more schools through a fee-charging technical assistance and training program for parents, teachers, and others interested in incorporating the Sports4Kids approach. Sports4Kids envisioned leading a movement for play in schools. "We are working to get enough geographic presence that we become the gold standard and to some extent a household word," Vialet said. "So when people hear 'Playworks,' they think it makes sense that every kid needs recess." Elizabeth Cushing, deputy director for strategy and development, added, "Those schools will demonstrate how play can impact learning and children's well-being. We are leveraging them to train other schools to do what we do. We are not satisfied with just direct service. We have a vision that every child in America's sixty thousand public schools will get to play every day. If we had enough money to serve every school directly with training, we would do it everywhere. But we don't."

The funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation covers Sports4Kids' cost of operating in new schools, in declining amounts over three years to allow them time to find other money to cover this expense. The grant also added a \$5 million line of credit to the \$1.5 million the program had to cover expenses until schools paid their \$23,500 fee each year. This expansion plan foresaw the most significant growth in the third and fourth years.

Sports4Kids ramped up its operations to manage this next expansion phase. It began planning one year in advance and had a recruitment team, personnel structure, and training in place so

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that the program was ready to run at the start of the new year. Again, Vialet sought out the principals who had buzz for being innovators, used the car GPS system, and dropped in on principals. The one-week demonstrations were again presented as a taste of what the program would be like.

“It’s so difficult to explain the impact of this program unless you can actually see it and know how that whole demonstration week went for us,” said Stevie Blakeley, principal at the Sacramento Elementary School in Portland. “Kids were beaming when they came off the playground. They would go back out and teach other kids, saying, ‘Did you get to play this game? Let me show you how to do it.’ I cannot tell you what a difference it made to have an extra person who really knew how to teach kids games and activities, keep them interested, and work with teachers. We saw a huge change in how our kids function on the playground and [in] their readiness to return to the classroom and learn.”

## Economic Challenges and Sustainability

Sports4Kids—now Playworks—continues to generate effusive testimonials from children, parents, teachers, principals, and coaches themselves. Positive evaluations of its impact are starting to pile up. Kristen Madsen, a researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, Center for Weight and Health, examined findings of the annual California Healthy Kids Survey and concluded that “greater exposure to Playworks during elementary school was associated with greater meaningful participation in school, problem-solving skills, and increased physical activity.”

Favorable news coverage continues to follow the program. Stories have appeared in local newspaper outlets, in prominent publications (such as *The Washington Post*), in television and radio features (such as NPR, the PBS *NewsHour*, and *ABC News*), and in a Portland, Oregon, television news feature. A New Orleans *Times-Picayune* headline proclaimed, “Peace recesses become child’s play: Playground bullying at schools has decreased.”

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But there are doubters as well. *The New York Times* published an article in March 2010 citing people critical of the kind of approach used by Playworks as being overly regimented and not allowing children time to just relax. It quoted Romina Barros, an assistant clinical professor at New York's Albert Einstein College of Medicine who has published articles on the benefits of recess, as saying, "children still benefit most when they are let alone to daydream, solve problems, use their imagination to invent their own games, and 'be free to do what they choose to do.'"<sup>8</sup> One reader, commenting on the article online, wrote, "How sad. What about the kids who need some time to stare at clouds? What about the kids with lousy motor skills who now face another time when they feel like failures?"<sup>9</sup>

Most important, with money for schools so tight, nearly every extra expense, including Playworks, is carefully scrutinized. School districts with tight budgets must decide whether Playworks is so important that it shouldn't be touched or whether it is a program that, no matter how good it might be, must be forgone in times of economic hardship. Twenty-three thousand dollars is a lot of money for a strapped school district, and school superintendents, principals, and communities must decide whether Playworks is worth that investment. Some are answering that it is not and that they simply cannot afford the program.

Before the 2009–2010 school year, with the nation's economy in a tailspin, some retrenching had occurred. Playworks had operated in about a dozen middle and high schools in the Bay Area, and this was stopped. Nationally, the program expanded to about thirty fewer schools than planned in that year, also as a result of the bleak financial outlook. The program was beginning to miss growth targets, and with the largest expansion planned for years three and four (2011 and 2012), the program anticipated it would probably reach approximately 520 schools by 2012 (instead of 650).

During the 2009–2010 expansion push, the plan was for the organization to start up in New Orleans and St. Louis in the first year and then in Portland (Oregon), Newark, and Los Angeles in the second year. St. Louis was scrapped because of financial pressures and because schools



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there chose not to use the Title I money for the program, Vialet said. Playworks also aborted plans to serve Atlanta because the majority of schools there did not have recess and would not commit to instituting it.

A number of schools approached for this chapter either were unable to afford the program for the 2009–2010 school year or anticipated that they might have to drop Playworks the following year because of unusually grim school budget projections. Mildred Goss Elementary in San Jose reluctantly gave up the program in 2009–2010 when it had to make a difficult choice with shrinking resources between Playworks and another program that provided academic assistance during school. The school had been showcased in an NPR story about Sports4Kids, and the principal, teachers, parents, and kids had been wildly pleased about site coordinator Michelle and the positive energy she brought to the school. “We talk about it a lot as a staff that so much has changed so quickly, how difficult it is to maintain Michelle’s structure and order,” said the principal, Brian Schmaedick. “In the two months since the year started, the environment on the playground has been slowly deteriorating.” He said it was a “sad decision.” In fact, the program was missed so much that the district decided to bring it back for the 2010–2011 school year and to expand it to other schools in the district as well. “We’re making cuts in other areas to make it work,” he said.

Even at Ohrenberger in Boston, the subject of the Harvard case study, the principal thought she might not be able to pay for Playworks in 2010–2011. “The program is great, but how do you sustain it during a fiscally tough time?” asked Eileen Nash, principal for Ohrenberger and Beethoven elementary schools, which both have Playworks. “We’re all talking about it in Boston, how hard it is.”

And Manzanita Community in Oakland expected it would probably give up Playworks in 2010 because the school district was requiring very steep budgetary cuts. For the principal Eyana Spencer, who had vowed that she would not run Manzanita without Playworks, this was a bitter pill. “It’s unsettling because we’re going into our fifth year with Playworks—how can we continue to make the gains we have if we cut this out?” she asked.

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Playworks officials were sanguine about the schools' economic challenges, even as their biggest expansion targets yet were coming up in the next two years. Enough schools were continuing their commitment to the program, they said. Planning was in full swing in late 2009 to set up shop in six new cities for 2010–2011, and more schools were signing up for the program than ever, Vialet said. A major effort had been mounted to raise money, and it was going well, especially among individual donors, she said.

The biggest concern was California, where schools were more constrained because of the state's financial crisis. But Vialet was philosophical. "I am always worried, but am I more worried now? No," she said. "I knew when we got into this we were trying to do something extraordinarily difficult, so there is not a sudden awareness." The economy's historic decline may be giving Playworks just the push it needs to put the structure in place to weather these times, she said. "Not to be excessively Pollyanna about this, but trying to achieve scale and sustainability now might have been the best thing to happen to us because we have to do it in a solidly retail way, we have to build an infrastructure of support."

In recognition of the difficult economic situation, in 2009 Playworks made some critical changes. The city directors, who had largely focused on assuring the quality of the new programs in his or her city, became the executive directors and were charged primarily with raising funds locally from corporations and individuals donors. (Quality assurance was given to the area directors.) New hires were expected to have fundraising skills. It was the kind of work Vialet had excelled at, but she couldn't be everywhere, and the organization learned through experience that the leader of each city's program needed these fundraising skills, too. "The executive directors are the linchpins to each city's success," Elizabeth Cushing said. "They have to sell the program to everyone in the community and to funders. They have to be entrepreneurial and focus on building relationships and sales." The local advisory boards were revamped, too, taking a new form as boards of directors and receiving more responsibility for helping Playworks become financially strong.

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The name of the program changed as well. “It was our experience that people assumed they knew what we did,” Cushing said. “They were almost always wrong. They thought we did competitive sports like baseball or midnight basketball or that we did after-school sports. They never thought of four square or kickball or tag. That confusion was hard for us, particularly when we’re trying to build new relationships to raise money.” The program worked with a New York consulting firm, which conducted research with school principals, staff, and donors, and found that the name and logo did not readily communicate what the organization does. Many names were considered until Playworks was chosen and put in place in July 2009, along with the launch of a new Web site and logo.

Playworks also began a fee-supported technical assistance business, expecting to provide training to volunteer parents, teachers, and youth workers who could then bring its brand of play to hundreds of thousands more children. It began working with Head Start in New York City and in Stockton, California, schools. Despite the economic situation, Playworks officials kept their eyes on the larger goal of building a movement for play that reaches all American schoolchildren, rich or poor. “We’re tracking very well,” said David Rothenberg, Playworks’ executive director. “It’s hard to keep people focused on a specific goal and reminding people that life is life. It’s very likely our path will not mirror some line we had on a graph created in 2006 or 2007, but we continue to grow, and it’s really impressive.”

The organization has raised its profile significantly. It drew attention to itself as a leader in play in the nation’s schools through its programs, media outreach, informative, attractively packaged materials, and an impressively designed, elaborate Web site. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation report, *Recess Rules*, highlighted Playworks as it made the case for why recess is the ideal time for physical activity. The Foundation also produced a promotional video on the program that Playworks distributed. Playworks teamed up with the Cartoon Network, the National PTA, and others in a 2008 *Rescuing Recess* campaign to recruit volunteers to provide one million hours of physical activity and recess. In addition, Playworks won a Changemaker award in the Sport for a Better World competition sponsored by Nike and Ashoka. In 2009, Playworks was invited to the White House three times, helping to supervise

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play in one of the visits during the annual Easter Egg Roll. Together with several other organizations, Vialet also worked with the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation to develop strategies for the First Lady to embrace in addressing the nation's physical inactivity crisis.

By the close of 2009, the organization that started out with two employees in 1996 in Berkeley had a staff of 264 employees and was making recess an enjoyable and healthy experience for seventy thousand low-income, inner-city children at 172 schools in ten cities. With the Foundation's second expansion grant ending in 2012, it is questionable whether the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's support will continue. (Although, with AmeriCorps and other government funding contributing at least 15 percent of the expenses, schools paying 40 percent, and a major drive for fundraising reportedly succeeding, the program is likely to sustain itself at some level.) One thing remains unquestionable: this program of roshamboing, high-fiving, formerly unruly kids, inspiring coaches, and junior coaches who keep the playground safe and fun is meeting a need. "Playworks gives kids the opportunity to see that there is a different way to solve problems," said Ohrenberger's Eileen Nash, whose own school may be forced by economic reasons to drop the program. "When kids feel good about coming to school because they're not worried about conflicts, they're able to take pride in learning. This is one of the best things we can do for children."

#### *Notes*

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