



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

## *Can Tag Help Schools Teach?*

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Elementary schools are faced with a challenge: boosting student learning in an era when students face far more than schoolwork-related difficulties. Too often today, kids enter the classroom contending with issues ranging from bullying and emotional trauma to family instability and economic hardship – which can lead to behavioral problems that distract from teaching and learning.

Schools have a strong interest in encouraging positive student behavior in order to get as much learning as possible out of each school day. In addition, helping students work and play well together and forge positive relationships with each other and their teachers is vital to their long-term success.

The least appreciated and least studied parts of the school day are recess and other school-based play time. Principals or teachers will tell you that a bad recess has a negative effect on the entire school day. New research conducted by experts at Mathematica Policy Research and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University examines how investing in recess and organized play can benefit the entire school day.

Is it possible that recess holds the key to transforming the school climate and making the day go smoothly? Can a good game of tag or rock-paper-scissors make it easier to teach and learn?

## *How Playtime Makes a Difference*

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The following positive impacts were found as a direct result of Playworks, a program that brings a safe, healthy recess environment and other organized playtime to elementary schools:

- ▶ **Less Bullying.** Teachers in Playworks schools reported less bullying and exclusionary behavior during recess than teachers in control schools.
- ▶ **Better Recess Behavior and Readiness for Class.** Teachers at Playworks schools tended to report better student behavior at recess and readiness for class than teachers at control schools and were more likely to report that their students enjoyed adult-organized recess activities.
- ▶ **More Time for Teaching.** Teachers in Playworks schools reported having fewer difficulties and spending significantly less time transitioning to learning activities after recess than teachers in control schools. Playworks students were also more likely than control students to report better behavior and attention in class after sports, games and play.
- ▶ **Safer Schools.** Teachers in Playworks schools perceived that students felt safer and more included at recess, compared to teachers in control schools.
- ▶ **Satisfied Teachers.** Nearly 100 percent of teachers in Playworks schools reported that they wanted the program in their school again the following year.

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## Recess as a Vital Opportunity to Improve Schools

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America spends more than \$800 billion dollars a year on education. Yet the system undervalues recess, which may offer one of the most powerful opportunities to strengthen schools, foster healthy child development and boost learning.

These results contribute to a growing body of evidence that a safe, healthy recess environment is a key driver of better behavior and learning. They suggest that even a small investment in recess could produce major gains in schools that serve the nation's most vulnerable students.

Across the country, schools are beginning to demonstrate a stronger commitment to recess because they see the benefits on the playground and in the classroom. As our schools work to meet the challenge of boosting student achievement and well-being under serious constraints, we must consider recess, and partnerships like Playworks, as part of the solution.

## About Playworks and the Research

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Playworks is a nonprofit organization that places trained, full-time adults in low-income schools to provide opportunities for healthy play during recess and class time. Playworks activities are designed to engage students in physical activity, foster social skills like cooperation and conflict resolution, improve students' ability to focus on class work, decrease behavioral problems and improve school climate.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation enlisted Mathematica Policy Research and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University to conduct a scientifically rigorous evaluation of Playworks. The randomized study compared schools using Playworks to a control group of similar schools without the program during the 2010-2011 school year in five cities across the country.



*At schools that partner with Playworks, teachers report less bullying, better behavior and readiness for class, and more time for teaching.*