









## Does Better Recess Equal a Better School Day?

Randomized controlled trial of Playworks shows widespread benefits, including less bullying, more physical activity, and more time for teaching.

Despite shrinking budgets, schools are faced with the challenge of boosting academic performance while also having to address the social, emotional, and physical needs of students. Recess and other school-based playtime are some of the least studied elements of the school day. Elementary school principals and teachers often say, however, that as goes recess, so goes the school day.

A randomized controlled trial 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 through a program called Playworks benefits both teachers and students during the school day. This new research contributes to a growing body of evidence that a safe, healthy, and organized recess environment—like the one Playworks provides—has the potential to be a key driver of better behavior and learning.

Overall, the study found that Playworks improved student outcomes in four different domains: 1) school climate, 2) conflict resolution and aggression, 3) physical activity, and 4) learning and academic performance.

Specifically, the evaluation found the following impacts:

- ▶ Less Bullying. Teachers in Playworks schools reported significantly less bullying and exclusionary behavior during recess compared to teachers in control schools—a 43 percent difference in average rating scores
- Increased Feelings of Safety at School. Playworks teachers' average rating of students' feelings of safety at school was 20 percent higher than the average rating reported by teachers in control schools.
- ▶ More Vigorous Physical Activity. Accelerometer data showed that children in Playworks schools spent significantly more time engaged in vigorous physical activity at recess than their peers in control schools (14 percent versus 10 percent of recess time—a 43 percent difference).
- ▶ Enhanced Readiness to Learn. Teachers in Playworks schools reported spending significantly less time to transition from recess to learning activities compared to teachers in control schools (34 percent fewer minutes).

## How Playworks Makes a Difference

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.

Playworks has full-time coaches in 367 schools in 22 cities. The organization also serves more than 480 schools and community organizations through additional direct-service and training programs. Playworks has plans to expand to 27 cities across the country by 2016 and to provide play and physical activity to more than 1 million students every day.











## Is There More to Recess Than Meets the Eye?

These results contribute to greater scholarly interest in the topic of school recess and in the growing body of evidence that recess can be a key driver of better behavior and learning. Last year, the <u>American Academy of Pediatrics</u> concluded that "recess is a necessary break in the day for optimizing a child's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development."

The new research on Playworks goes beyond previous studies about the inherent value of recess itself. It raises the possibility that what happens at recess can affect a school's learning environment in important ways, and that improving recess may enable schools to address a number of pressing issues at the same time.

As schools work to meet the challenge of improving learning under serious constraints, we must consider recess, and partnerships like Playworks, as part of the solution.



The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supported Mathematica Policy Research and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University to conduct a rigorous evaluation of Playworks during the 2010–11 and 2011–12 school years. Twenty-nine schools interested in Playworks were randomly assigned to treatment (i.e., schools with Playworks) and control groups (i.e., similar schools without Playworks). Data were collected from students, teachers, school staff and administrative records to document key outcomes related to school climate, conflict resolution and aggression, learning and academic performance, youth development, student behavior, play, physical activity, and recess.

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