



## Playworks: Supporting Positive School Climate in Low-Income Elementary Schools

*A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society.*

National School Climate Center (2007)

### Summary

Research has shown that a positive school climate improves social, emotional, and academic outcomes for youth and is influenced by: (1) school structure, policies, and leadership; (2) teaching and learning environments; (3) physical and emotional safety; and (4) positive relationships. Results from the *Study of Playworks in Eight Bay Area Schools* show that with successful program implementation, Playworks can support an improved school climate. Playworks promoted an organized and structured recess by teaching students a variety of games, tools for conflict resolution, inclusive language and positive messaging, all of which reportedly led to improved student engagement and reductions in conflict at recess. Teachers and principals linked these changes to a physically and emotionally safer recess environment for students. In schools where staff and administrators strongly embraced Playworks and its core values, the program's strategies for conflict resolution and inclusivity followed students back into the classroom and improved the learning environment. Students reported strong relationships with adults at school, but those who engaged most with the Playworks coach reported a significant increase in feelings of adult care from fall to spring. Strong school leadership and early staff training were key ingredients in promoting teachers' understanding of and support for the program at recess and in the classroom. However, school and Playworks discipline policies that removed students from recess for misconduct or incomplete schoolwork diluted the program's potential effects on school climate.

### The Playworks Program

Playworks is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the health and well-being of children by providing them with increased opportunities for physical activity and safe, meaningful play. To accomplish this, Playworks provides schools with full-time coaches who teach students games with a common set of rules; provide conflict resolution tools; and encourage positive language and inclusive behavior. Coaches integrate these skills by playing alongside students at recess and working with upper grade junior coaches who are trained to lead games and act as role models on the play yard. Class game time provides an additional opportunity for students and teachers to get to know the coach, learn new games and practice positive play skills and teamwork in a small group setting.

### Focus of This Brief

This brief is one in a series of final reports from the *Study of Playworks Implementation in Eight Bay Area Schools*. It examines the ways that Playworks supports positive school climate and reports students', teachers', and principals' views of the program's effects on the overall school environment. This brief builds on earlier study publications, including a literature review, a theory of change model, an interim report, and a final report.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These publications can be found at: <http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=63651>.

### **About the Study of Playworks Implementation in Eight Bay Area Schools**

During the 2009-2010 school year, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University to conduct an implementation study of Playworks in San Francisco Bay Area schools. The study used mixed methods – including interviews, observations, focus groups, and surveys – to address four key questions: (1) In what ways does Playworks affect students’ recess and classroom experiences? (2) In what ways does Playworks affect school personnel? (3) In what ways does Playworks affect the school climate overall? and (4) In what ways does Playworks implementation vary across the newly implementing schools and what factors contribute to this variation? Data were collected in the fall, winter, and spring at six schools that were implementing Playworks for the first year (“newly implementing schools”), and in the winter at two additional schools where Playworks had been operating for several years (“established schools”).

### **The Importance of School Climate**

The National School Climate Center (2010) defines a positive school climate as “a safe, supportive environment that nurtures social and emotional, ethical, and academic skills.” Most researchers agree that a positive school climate is comprised of four primary components:

- School environmental factors, including physical school layout, schedules, policies, professional relationships and leadership;
- Teaching and learning environment, including positive classroom climate and social and civic learning;
- Physical and emotional safety at school; and
- Positive relationships, including students’ feelings of support by peers and adults and sense of connectedness to school.

Research has demonstrated that a positive school climate incorporating these elements is linked to effective health promotion and risk reduction efforts with youth (Cohen, 2006; Najaka et. al., 2002; Juvonen et al., 2004). School climate has also been shown to affect students’ self-esteem (Hoge et. al, 1990), absenteeism (Purkey & Smith, 1982; Rumberger, 1987) and suspension rates (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, et al., 1982). In addition to positive effects on the social and emotional wellness of youth, research demonstrates that school climate is also directly related to academic achievement (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Ma & Klingler, 2000; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Stewart, 2008). Intentional focus on developing a sustainable, positive school climate that is safe, caring, and responsive fosters youth development, physical and emotional wellness, and student learning – all necessary for a healthy and productive transition into adulthood.

### **Playworks Positively Influences the School Environment**

Research suggests that school climate is significantly influenced by the school’s physical environment, structures and policies, and leadership. Playworks aims to promote an improved school environment by providing an organized and structured recess. However, existing school structures and policies that affected program implementation were key mediators of the effects of Playworks on school climate. Additionally, schools with a strong leader and cohesive staff were more likely to be open to the influence of Playworks’ philosophy.



### **Playworks improved the structure and organization of recess**

As soon as they arrived on campus, Playworks coaches began making changes to the structure of recess. They taught the rules to a core set of games; designated certain spaces for particular games and activities and provided additional equipment; introduced techniques for playing games more safely; taught students to use ro-sham-bo (rock-paper-scissors) for resolution of minor conflicts; and recruited and trained junior coaches to lead games. Through these activities, Playworks simultaneously increased structure and decreased the need for adult supervision and intervention in student conflicts. Teachers and administrators credited changes in the structure and supervision of recess with increased feelings of safety among students. In one case, the increase in structure and supervision allowed a school to reopen an area of the playground that had gone unused because it had been deemed unsafe. At another, the increased structure due to Playworks led the principal and coach to consider a before-school structured and supervised program on the play yard to improve morning safety.

Playworks was limited in its ability to influence school climate at some schools because of existing school structures and policies. In the four schools in our study that were in Program Improvement status,<sup>2</sup> block scheduling limited coaches' abilities to schedule class game time, made it difficult for junior coaches to supervise recess, or resulted in crowded play yards. Playworks also made little progress in changing discipline policies that affected recess and students' opportunities for play. At all eight schools in the study we observed at least one discipline policy that prevented students from engaging in play.<sup>3</sup> These included sitting students out of recess to complete school work or because of poor classroom behavior and revoking class game time or recess as consequence. Coaches did not actively discourage these practices, though several said they tried to encourage teachers to use Playworks as a reward for positive behavior. Coaches themselves also gave students consequences for misconduct by making them sit out of games. In order to keep students engaged and active at recess, Playworks should consider adopting and recommending alternative discipline strategies that would not deny play and physical activity opportunities to students.

### **School leadership influenced Playworks implementation**

The presence of strong principal leadership and a cohesive staff clearly affected the extent to which Playworks was integrated into the school and influenced the climate. In two newly implementing schools, the Playworks program was adopted as part of a comprehensive plan to change school climate and improve school culture. At these schools, Playworks was one of several programs put into place to improve physical and mental health, academic readiness, and student behaviors and relationships. At one established school, where Playworks clearly benefited from strong principal leadership and staff unity, one teacher described the relationship of staff members: "We work together...we stand by each other...every kid's my kid...We don't really see it as anything less than a community." Playworks was

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<sup>2</sup> In California, all schools that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) are identified for Program Improvement under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and subject to special requirements under state and federal law. For more information see <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ti/programimprov.asp>.

<sup>3</sup> This is also discussed in the brief *Playworks: Supporting Play and Physical Activity in Low-Income Elementary Schools*.



able to thrive best in schools that had this type of professional camaraderie, values aligned with Playworks' philosophy, and a principal that worked closely with the coach to see that the program components were fully implemented.

Program implementation was weaker at schools where leadership was not strong and commitment to improving the school climate was not universal. At one established school, teachers and administrators knew little about Playworks' strategies and values, despite its having been on campus for six years. At a newly implementing school, the principal, who supported Playworks, had a fragile relationship with staff and consequently staff had a more tentative relationship with Playworks. And, at other schools, principals did not fully support the implementation of class game time and the junior coach program, which had reverberating effects on students' Playworks engagement at recess.

### **Playworks Supports Teaching and Learning**

Cooperation, cohesion, respect and trust are all linked to improved learning environments (Ghaith, 2003; Finnan, Schnepel, & Anderson, 2003). Playworks promotes these values primarily at recess, but the skills that students learn as a result of the program have the potential to carry over to the classroom during instructional time.

### **Playworks tools made their way into the classroom**

Teachers and students reported that ro-sham-bo was a fair way for not only deciding who was in or out of a game, but for making classroom decisions such as who would perform which tasks during group work. Positive Playworks language like "good job, nice try," when used in the classroom, promoted a supportive learning environment in which children felt more comfortable participating in activities and taking risks. The effects of these tools were felt most strongly in classrooms that were already aligned with the teacher's classroom management strategies and values. In schools where many teachers embraced Playworks, the program had its strongest influence on overall school climate.

Adoption of Playworks strategies by teachers was far from universal, however. In some cases, teachers said that they were already using these or similar strategies with their classes and stayed with their own approach. Playworks strategies were much less likely to permeate into the classroom in schools that were less successful in implementing them at recess and among teachers who engaged less often with the coach – including fifth grade teachers who did not participate in class game time. This was especially the case at the two schools which experienced coach turnover. In contrast, in schools where students experienced an increase in feelings of safety and supportiveness at recess, teachers reported that these shifts followed into the classroom.

### **Playworks influenced staff attitudes about students and play**

Some teachers experienced a shift in their attitudes as a result of Playworks. Three-quarters of teachers reported valuing youth leadership more or much more and had higher expectations about student behavior since Playworks was implemented. One teacher reported that Playworks provided "another area for [teachers] to let students shine" and created an important environment where teachers and students had the opportunity to play together and see each other in a different light. Further, the



majority of teachers reported valuing play more since Playworks arrived on campus. Some appreciated students' out-of-class skills, like soccer, and behaviors, like teamwork, and others reported gaining appreciation for the social and emotional development that happens during play. Appreciating students' skills and needs may improve overall relationships between teachers and students and contribute to a supportive learning environment.

Students' increased engagement in play and teachers' greater appreciation for it aligned with interview and focus group findings that students and teachers were happier to be at school with Playworks on campus. One principal reported that this increased happiness had led to better school attendance, which in turn may contribute to improved learning. Teachers were also happier because, as three-quarters reported in the teacher survey, Playworks reduced their stress levels while on yard duty. In fact, one teacher told us that yard duty was "a lot more relaxing...you actually enjoy yard duty now."

### **Early training supported staff engagement with Playworks' philosophy**

Staff training at the implementing school is intended to provide teachers and other school personnel with a solid understanding of the Playworks philosophy, an overview of program components, and exposure to key strategies and techniques. We found that an early training of school staff set the stage for a quick roll-out of program components, teacher buy-in and understanding of Playworks' philosophy, and integration of the coach into the school culture. Early staff training (in the first few weeks of the program) was a key contributor to successful program implementation and should be a requirement for schools who adopt the program. However, just two of the six newly implementing schools had training in the first month of Playworks' operation. Another school was trained in October, two were trained in December and January, and one never received training.

Where it occurred, teachers described Playworks' training as high-quality, fun, and worthwhile. According to respondents to the teacher survey in the spring, the training supported teachers in learning new conflict resolution strategies (52%) as well as techniques to help students be more inclusive (66%) and support one another (67%).

Teachers in the three schools where training happened very late or not at all indicated with much more frequency during spring interviews that they did not have a strong understanding of how the Playworks program components were intended to operate. One teacher from the school that received no training commented, "I think it would have been nice to have [the coach] or someone come in at a staff meeting and really explain why they're here... I don't think we necessarily understand that much about the program." These schools were also less likely to have teacher buy-in and support of critical aspects of the program such as participating in class game time and allowing junior coaches to participate in younger students' recesses.

In contrast, teachers in schools with earlier training were more likely to feel that the program was having important effects on school climate (Exhibit 1). Teachers in the three schools trained in early or mid-fall were more likely to understand the program goals (86% compared to 75%) and were more



likely to feel that the program addressed important needs and was valued by staff and students. In addition, 94% of teachers in schools that were trained earlier reported that it was very important that Playworks return next year, compared to 78% of teachers with later or no training.

**Exhibit 1. Teachers’ Views of Playworks by Timing of Staff Training**

	<b>Early or Mid-Fall Training</b>	<b>Winter or No Training</b>
	<i>Percent Responding “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”</i>	
I understand the goals of Playworks	85.7%	75.0%
Playworks addresses important student needs	95.9%	82.5%
Playworks is valued by staff at this school	95.9%	80.0%
Playworks is valued by students at this school	95.9%	92.5%
	<i>Percent Responding “Very Important”</i>	
How important is it that Playworks return next year	93.9%	77.8%

Source: JGC tabulations from the spring teacher surveys.

**Playworks Can Reduce Conflicts at Recess and Promote School Safety**

Research has suggested a strong connection between positive school climate and reduced bullying (Meraviglia, Becker, Rosenbluth, Sanchez, & Robertson, 2003) and feeling emotionally and physically safe at school is linked to positive learning and development (Devine & Cohen, 2007). Playworks aims to reduce conflicts by teaching children strategies to end disputes quickly before they escalate into full-blown fights. Common game rules, an emphasis on sportsmanship and positive language, and a reduction in recess idleness are further intended to reduce recess conflicts.

**Playworks reduced conflicts and bullying**

An improved feeling of safety was one of the most universally recognized benefits of the Playworks program. In the spring, three-quarters of fifth grade students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe at school and three-quarters of teachers thought students felt more emotionally and physically safe since Playworks was implemented. Teachers and principals attributed this change primarily to improvements in the structure and layout of recess and a reduction in conflict and bullying.

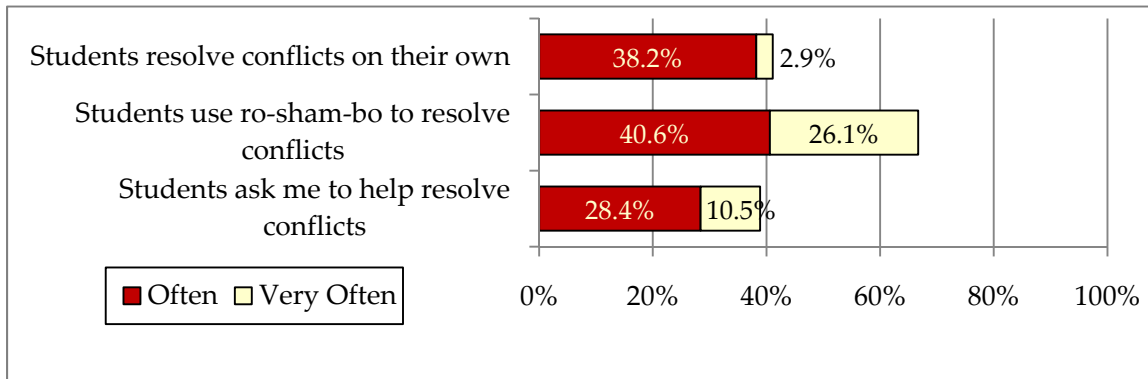
Nearly 80% of teachers surveyed in the spring reported an improvement in the amount of conflict on the play yard and all of the principals reported fewer students being sent to the office during recess. One principal reported an 80% reduction in suspensions after Playworks was implemented and another estimated there were one-tenth the number of conflicts that there had been in the previous year. Nearly half of the teachers also reported less bullying at their schools since Playworks was implemented.

The adoption of conflict resolution tools, particularly ro-sham-bo, was key to reducing conflicts. About two-thirds of teachers surveyed reported that students used ro-sham-bo to resolve conflicts and 40% reported that children were able to resolve conflicts on their own either often or very often (Exhibit 2).



According to one teacher, Playworks “has given the kids tools to actually solve disagreements with their peers...to figure out what type of problem they really do need an adult for...and what really is in their control to solve.”

**Exhibit 2: Teachers’ Views of Student Conflict Resolution in the Spring**



Source: JGC tabulations from the spring teacher survey.

More recess engagement was credited with a reduction in physical fights and bullying. According to one teacher, "Bullying has virtually been eliminated by having...constructive activities at recess." Another said that students used to ask to stay inside during recess, but this year, “when you go outside...the number of kids who are actually doing something physical, organized, and not being mean to each other has significantly increased." One principal noted that in the past some students got into fights out of boredom, but indicated that these types of fights were no longer occurring because students were engaged consistently in games.

Teachers and administrators also attributed a reduction in conflict and increased feelings of student safety to improved student self-regulation during recess. In the spring, three-quarters of teachers reported that students were better able to regulate their own behavior and positively affect the behavior of their classmates as a result of Playworks.

**Conflicts continued to occur, but escalated less frequently**

Though most teachers and administrators agreed that the number of conflicts had been reduced following the introduction of Playworks, in the spring nearly 40% of teachers surveyed reported that students still came to them to help resolve conflicts often or very often. Ro-sham-bo was not appropriate for resolving some types of conflicts, particularly those that were interpersonal. One teacher reported that ro-sham-bo worked well for “non-emotional” things, like negotiating game rules, but that for more serious issues adult intervention was still required. Likewise, not all adults agreed that they had seen a reduction in bullying. About 20% of teachers reported that bullying had increased and 30% reported that it had held steady since Playworks arrived on campus. Of those who reported more bullying, half were teachers from one of the two schools that experienced coach turnover.



Teachers and principals at these two schools agreed that there was a rise in playground conflict during the coach transition period.

Students also did not always agree that conflict and bullying had decreased. Junior coaches from three schools reported that there was less conflict and physical fighting at recess since the arrival of Playworks. One student said, “Well, I’ve been here for six years... There was a lot of arguing until Playworks came.” However, junior coaches from the other three newly implementing schools did not report a similar improvement, with many citing ongoing conflict at recess during spring focus groups. The fifth grade student survey also indicated that most students noted little change in the amount of conflict they experienced at recess over the course of the year. Students in the spring were more likely to report feeling bothered by another student or getting into an argument or fight during recess, and only slightly less likely to report getting teased during recess, than in the fall (Exhibit 3).

Importantly, most teachers and principals felt that the more aggressive and physical fights had diminished even though minor conflicts still occurred at recess in the spring. What had changed, they reported, was students’ problem solving skills and their abilities to manage disagreements more quickly and without escalation. According to one teacher, “This year, we could merely watch recess, hang out with the kids and enjoy yard duty. We wanted our kids to learn how to get along and solve problems. Playworks, for the most part, has met this expectation.”

**Exhibit 3. Students’ Reports of Conflict in Fall and Spring**

	Fall	Spring
At recess, how often do you...	<i>Percent Responding “Sometimes” or “A Lot”</i>	
Get teased by other kids about not being good at games or sports?	37.1%	34.5%
Feel bothered or annoyed by another student?	48.5%	50.3%
Get into an argument or fight with other students?	21.5%	29.2%

Source: JGC tabulations from the fall and spring fifth grade student surveys.

**Playworks Supports Positive Relationships**

Strong relationships with peers and adults increase students’ feelings of connectedness to school and are related to positive school outcomes and emotional development.<sup>4</sup> Playworks supports improved student relationships primarily by promoting inclusivity and encouraging students to play with children outside their normal social circles. At some schools, coaches promoted inclusivity between boys and girls by reducing competitiveness and discouraging rough or violent play. In some cases, inclusivity led to the development of new friendships, including those between younger and older students. Where Playworks strategies were less widely embraced, student relationships were less likely to shift. Gender segregation was especially difficult to overcome and at all schools, we observed boys and girls playing separately, particularly in the more competitive games like soccer and basketball

<sup>4</sup> The role of student-adult relationships on youth development is further discussed in the brief *Playworks: Promoting Positive Youth Development in Low-Income Elementary Schools*.



where boys dominated the play. At schools where these competitive games created conflict and violence, they required more coach monitoring, which meant coaches spent less time with girls.

Connectedness to adults was high among fifth grade students who responded to a survey in both fall and spring. Students who were most likely to have had continued interactions with the coach – students attending schools that did not experience coach turnover, boys, and students who reported an increased use of Playworks strategies – reported increases in feeling connected to an adult at school from fall to spring. However, for some students, the Playworks coach may have provided a significant amount of the care that students reported feeling from adults at school.

## Conclusion

Where Playworks was implemented successfully and where students, teachers and administrators embraced the program, school climate improved. Playworks supported caring and collaborative learning environments, contributed to feelings of school safety, and improved relationships among students and between students and adults. Playworks had the hardest time influencing school climate at schools that were trained later or not at all, in schools with coach turnover, and in classrooms where teachers were less engaged with the coach and the program. Though Playworks has the potential to significantly influence school climate, it can do so only under the right school conditions. Early staff training can improve teacher buy-in and increases the likelihood that Playworks positively influences school climate. Also, promoting positive disciplinary tactics both within Playworks and the school overall can keep students playing and active during their limited school day play time.

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