



What Happens When a Community Invests in Kids

How Schools, Community Partners, and Corporate Investment Are Changing What's Possible for St. Paul Students





Creating a Community of Support for Kids

On a Thursday morning in mid-May, the playground at Mississippi Creative Arts School in St. Paul, Minnesota, came alive with joy, student leadership, and a community showing up, together, for its kids. Students flew kites overhead while nearby, fourth and fifth-graders who had spent the year building their leadership skills led games for younger classmates with a calm confidence earned through months of practice.

What made the day extraordinary wasn't just the activities, but the breadth of people there to support them. The event brought together Saint Paul Public Schools leadership, representatives from the Minnesota Twins, Playworks team members, and employees from Ecolab. Alongside them were hundreds of students who, for one unforgettable day, got to spend time with a few of the organizations and people who showed up for them in a new way this school year.

Mississippi Creative Arts Play Day was a celebration of what happens when schools and community partners decide to invest in the same kids at the same time and in the same direction. It is one example of how schools and community partners are investing in students across Saint Paul and beyond.



A School That Leads with Its Community

At Mississippi Creative Arts School, community is at the foundation of the student experience. The school is committed to supporting students as whole people, creating an environment where their cultures and lived experiences are woven into everyday learning from the classroom to the playground.

A strong partnership with Playworks further supports this work to ensure every student has opportunities to play, connect, and lead. Across Saint Paul Public Schools, Playworks has collaborated with the district for years to foster these welcoming environments. At Mississippi Creative Arts, this shared mission is directly championed by the Ecolab Foundation. Their ongoing support not only sustains monthly recess programming but also creates leadership opportunities for students through Playworks' Junior Coach Leadership Program.

Playworks Minnesota's Annual Impact



50+

Partner schools & out of school time programs



25,000+

Students reached annually



1,000+

Youth leaders

Leadership Built Through Play

An essential part of the Play Day event was the team of Junior Coaches who helped lead activities for their peers. Their presence on May 15 was the result of a year spent developing leadership skills through the Playworks Junior Coach program.

Throughout the school year, 4th and 5th-grade students at Mississippi Creative Arts who were selected for the program learned how to bring groups together through play, introduce new games, and help resolve conflicts before they escalated. They also practiced creating spaces where younger students felt welcomed, included, and confident joining in.

Behind this transformation is Playworks Coach Travis, affectionately known to the school community as "Coach T." Throughout the year, he became a beloved fixture on the playground, guiding the older students as they learned to take charge.

"It's been wonderful working with Travis," said Dr. Kabaka, principal of Mississippi Creative Arts School, noting that students constantly ask when Coach T is coming back. "He's been a valuable asset and has been able to connect with our kids. He's given them tools and the ability just to be who they are and use their authentic selves to lead."

For Dr. Kabaka, the impact of that authentic leadership is most visible during kindergarten recess, a time many younger students eagerly anticipate.

"The younger kids look forward to it," Dr. Kabaka shared. "They see them and say, 'Oh, here's my Junior Coach that's coming out with us, and we'll get to play and have fun.'"

As younger students learn the routines of school, Junior Coaches help model how to share, take turns, solve problems, and collaborate with others.



"Oftentimes when we think about play, we think kids are just having fun... but they're also building the ability to collaborate with others," Dr. Kabaka explained. "I got to see firsthand where the Junior Coaches would step in and say, 'This is how you ask if you want to take a turn next,' or 'This is how we play this game.' It's been a really valuable program to teach the kids how to work with each other without always needing an adult."

The lessons extend far beyond the playground. By serving as mentors and role models, Junior Coaches develop communication, teamwork, and leadership skills that will benefit them throughout their lives. At Mississippi Creative Arts, they join more than 230 Junior Coaches trained across 10 Saint Paul Public Schools partner schools during the 2025-2026 school year. These students are helping build stronger, more connected school communities one recess at a time.





When Community Shows Up

While the Play Day celebration took place over a single afternoon, it's one example of the impact made possible by a broader network of partners committed to student well-being, belonging, and leadership across Saint Paul Public Schools. Alongside school and district leadership, support from Ramsey County's Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP), the Ramsey County Children's Mental Health Collaborative, the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, the Sauer Family Foundation, the Lillian Wright & C. Emil Berglund Foundation, Ecolab, the Minnesota Twins, and the St. Paul Saints helps create opportunities for students to build connections, develop leadership skills, and experience joyful, engaging school environments.

Saint Paul Public Schools, Playworks, the Ecolab Foundation, and the Minnesota Twins each played a role in bringing the event to life. Together, they created an experience that reflected the values Mississippi Creative Arts embodies throughout the school year, including belonging, leadership, cultural pride, and connection.

For Ecolab, whose headquarters are located just a few miles from the school, the event provided an opportunity for employees to engage directly with students in their community. Members of the company's Asian Community at Ecolab (ACE) Employee Resource Group volunteered throughout the day, helping facilitate activities celebrating Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month and connect with students.



Through Ecolab's broader partnership with the Minnesota Twins, both organizations came together at Mississippi Creative Arts to move beyond traditional sponsorship and engage directly with students and the school community. For Cole Vande Vegte, who helps manage the partnership between Ecolab and Playworks on behalf of the Twins, a real partnership has a specific meaning: "Partnership is at its strongest when it combines support with hands-on involvement to create meaningful experiences for organizations and the communities they are investing in." Not just a logo on a banner. Not a check written from a distance.

I was amazed by the enthusiasm of the kids and the volunteers from the Twins and Ecolab. Being out of the office for a couple of hours to run around with children and see the smiles on their faces was special." Vande Vegte said.

The connection between the Minnesota Twins, Ecolab, and Playworks is a story of partnership in action. Ecolab, a Fortune 500 company headquartered in St. Paul, wanted to move beyond traditional sponsorships and create meaningful opportunities for employees to invest in the communities where they work. Through Ecolab's existing partnership with the Minnesota Twins, a connection to Playworks was formed. Playworks then brought together the school, district, and community partners around a shared commitment to supporting students. Mississippi Creative Arts School, located near Ecolab's headquarters and deeply connected to its community, became the place where those relationships came together and made an impact.

That spirit was visible throughout the playground. District leaders spent time with students and staff. Volunteers flew kites, joined games, and helped create artwork. Twins representatives interacted with students alongside educators and community partners. Rather than observing from the sidelines, each group became part of the experience itself.

The result was more than a special event. It was a reflection of what can happen when schools, community organizations, and local partners work together in support of students.

Community Partners





Leading Us Forward

Mississippi Creative Arts is one school, but what happened there reflects something Playworks Minnesota sees across the state. In more than 50 schools and out-of-school time programs, reaching over 25,000 students this year, educators, community organizations, corporate partners, and funders are working together to create environments where students experience belonging, connection, leadership, and play.

Minnesota school leaders are navigating some of the most pressing challenges in a generation, like rising absenteeism, student mental health concerns, and increasing demands on staff. Research from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the 2025 Minnesota Principals Survey both suggest that belonging, connection, and play aren't extras. They are the foundation on which children's futures, and the shared futures of our communities, are built.

Playworks in Saint Paul Public Schools



The Mississippi Creative Arts Play Day was a joyful afternoon, but its significance extends far beyond a single day. After the kites were packed away and the chalk murals faded, the true impact lives on in the fifth grader who now knows how to lead with empathy, and in the kindergartener who feels a deep, secure sense of belonging at school. It lives in the everyday reality that play is not a break from learning, but the very foundation of it.

Ultimately, what happened in St. Paul is a blueprint for what meaningful community partnership can, and should, look like right now. It proves that creating a culture of support requires more than funding. It requires presence, partnership, and active participation toward a shared vision.

When a community makes a coordinated investment in kids and the power of play, it does more than just support students today. It gives them the tools, the confidence, and the backing they need to lead us all forward.

To learn more about Playworks' impact in Minnesota, visit playworks.org/minnesota or contact mninfo@playworks.org to see how you can strengthen the power of play in your community.



"Watching the SPPS Junior Coaches in action brings both pride and joy in the leadership skills that our students are learning. At each recess where I observed the coaches, I saw younger students flocking to the 4th and 5th-grade students as they led games that engaged them in movement, team building, and relationship skills. Younger students also looked to them for comfort and kindness when they felt frustrated or sad."

*- Jennifer Vigil
Program Specialist, SPPS Office of School Support*