

 PLAYWORKS

IMPACT REPORT **2025**



**PLAYWORKS
WISCONSIN**

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Our children are in need of strategies to cooperate and play. Playworks provides opportunities for them to cooperate and transfer skills to classroom and outdoor activities. -Partner Principal



LETTER FROM THE CEO

Reclaiming Joy, Building Community Through Play

Dear Friends,

This year reminded us just how essential play is to the health and development of America's children. Play isn't a break from learning; it's how children connect, grow, and thrive. In a world where our youngest generation is challenged every day by the conditions around them, play remains one of the most effective strategies we have to provide them with joy and fun and positive relationships with each other and adults who care about them.

Schools across the country have been asking big questions: How do we support every child--and adult--with becoming their best selves? How do we help them navigate the world? How do we inspire their academic motivation and community engagement? We know one critical response is that we play together.

Thanks to you, our community of play champions, we brought the power of play to hundreds of thousands of students this year. We saw kids step up as Junior Coaches, conflict on the playground resolved with high-fives and rock-paper-scissors, and teachers breathing easier as recess became a time of joy, not stress.

We trained thousands of educators to create engaging play spaces where every child knows how to get in the game. And we worked hard to ensure that students in our communities had access to safe, meaningful play every day, no matter what.

Research continues to show what we've always known; play strengthens academic performance, peer relationships, mental health, and resilience. Play gives kids the tools they need to navigate life with confidence and compassion.

There's still so much more to do. Too many children still lack access to safe, engaging play. That's why we're not slowing down. We're committed to ensuring every child experiences the joy and power of play, every day.

Thank you for believing in this mission and in the children we serve. You are making a difference by being a member of the Playworks community and advocate for play.

With deep gratitude,



ELIZABETH CUSHING

CEO Playworks



REGION OVERVIEW

MISSION

Playworks' mission is to improve the health and well-being of children by increasing opportunities for physical activity and safe, meaningful play.

VISION

Playworks' vision is that one day every child in America will have access to safe, fun, healthy play every day.

GEOGRAPHIC REACH

Playworks Wisconsin is proud to provide our programs and services throughout the state of Wisconsin. We provide our direct service programming to schools primarily in the Milwaukee area, where we are deeply embedded in the school communities and work hands-on with students and educators throughout the academic year. Beyond the metro region, our capacity-building services extend across the entire state, equipping schools, districts, and youth-serving organizations with the tools and training they need to foster safe, engaging play for every child, regardless of location.

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IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



As we wrap up an incredible school year, I want to take a joyful pause to say thank you. Because of YOU, students across our state experienced the magic of play in ways that will stick with them for years to come.

As Executive Director of Playworks Wisconsin, I'm filled with gratitude for the incredible community of play champions, like you, who made this joyful impact possible. You helped transform recess into a place where high-fives were plentiful, conflicts were solved with rock-paper-scissors, and kids learned how to lead with kindness and confidence. From the cheers

of a Junior Coach leading their first game to the smile of a kindergartener tagging in a new friend, your support made it all possible.

Together, we created joyful playgrounds where every child could get in the game, connect with their peers, and see themselves as a leader. You've helped build more than games, you've helped build resilient communities where joy is the norm and every student has a chance to shine. This summer, the ripple effect of your support continues. Our team is already hard at work training adults and preparing for next school year so that the power of play never skips a beat.

From all of us at Playworks Wisconsin, thank you for being part of this joyful movement. The games, growth, and giggles you've helped make happen are changing lives, one high-five at a time.

With boundless gratitude,

PJ Dever

Executive Director, Playworks Wisconsin



26,680 Students
Experiencing the
Power of Play



1,700 Youth Leaders,
Junior Coaches in
the State



67 Schools &
Community Based
Organizations

Diego Sanchez: An Emerging Leader

By Henry Metz

Our Partners Report that Playworks:

96% Increases the number of students that are physically active

92% Helps students develop the skills to succeed in their learning

98% Creates opportunities for all students to play together

98% Helps create a welcoming environment

From the moment he saw his older brother lead as a Junior Coach at Rogers Street Academy, Diego Sanchez was inspired to step into leadership. Diego's drive to make a difference was clear. In fact, he eagerly asked to become a Junior Coach when he was only in first grade. Recognizing the spark of emerging leadership, the school's Recess Manager (the school's recess coordinator), encouraged Diego to keep being a good role model, and assured him that his time to lead will come.

The school's Recess Manager, Josh Heinrich, fondly known as Mr. H, recognized that Diego's time had arrived. Now in third grade, Diego was one of just five students handpicked to begin

Junior Coaching a year early. Paired with Legacy Coaches, older students in sixth and seventh grade, Diego began training one on one, shadowing and learning from the Legacy Coaches leadership. Though he was shy and reserved at first, Diego quickly stood out for his determination and heart.

He was paired with Aiden, a seasoned Legacy Coach, and the two formed a powerful duo. Early on, Diego mirrored Aiden's coaching style and strategies. As the year went on, they shared responsibilities, with Diego taking the lead more and more. By the end of the school year, Diego grew as leader while helping Aiden grow as a mentor.

When the school's gym underwent renovations and a brand new soccer field opened, Junior Coaches faced a whirlwind of changes. Diego often found himself leading games solo, even coaching students older than himself. He stepped up with confidence, introducing new games, resolving playground conflicts, and holding kids accountable with kindness and fairness.

Diego's bilingual skills became another superpower. Many days, he led entire games in Spanish for up to 25 kindergarteners. They adored him.

Diego says the encouragement from his Coach, Mr. H, and fellow Junior Coaches gave him the courage to step out of his comfort zone. Now, he's not just participating, he's leading.

Diego's story is a powerful reminder that leaders will emerge when they are developed and cultivated with the proper support and opportunity. The Junior Coach Leadership Program at Rogers Street Academy was successful because of the strong partnership between Playworks and the school's Recess Rockstar, Mr. H. This demonstrates how the Junior Coach Leadership Program empowers each student to grow into a strong, confident leader.



THANK YOU, BADER PHILANTHROPIES, FOR INVESTING IN MILWAUKEE'S YOUTH LEADERS



Playworks Wisconsin is deeply grateful to Bader Philanthropies for their continued partnership and generous support of our mission. Since 2020, Bader Philanthropies has been a true champion of play and youth leadership in Milwaukee. We're thrilled to share that they have awarded Playworks a new two-year grant to support the expansion of our Junior Coach Leadership Program (JCLP) and TeamUp service in Milwaukee schools.

This investment will allow us to grow our impact in a minimum of 13 elementary schools across Milwaukee, reaching hundreds of students with opportunities to lead, grow, and thrive. The JCLP builds essential life skills like conflict resolution, teamwork, and self-confidence, helping students see themselves as capable leaders. As one school leader recently shared, "The positive impact students can have on each other and the positive relationships formed through this program is priceless."

With the support of Bader Philanthropies, our TeamUp model will continue to transform recess into an inclusive, safe, and empowering experience, while also offering monthly skill-building classes, staff training, and mentoring through Junior Coach programming.

We are especially excited to align with Bader's new Children's Hope Scale, which resonates deeply with our belief in the power of hope, belonging, and joy to shape young lives. Research shows our Junior Coaches experience meaningful growth in perseverance, optimism, and academic motivation, which are all core indicators of long-term success.

Thank you, Bader Philanthropies, for helping Milwaukee's youth discover the leaders within themselves, one game, one cheer, and one hopeful moment at a time.



Hive Five Club Members

Alison Amphlett and Evan Knapp

Trishya Brown

Jami Burrell

Bridget Clementi

Courtney Curry

Lynn Debilzen

Joe Domina

Peter Drews

Katy Glodosky

Margaret Haagenzen

Barry Holcomb

Kathryn Horrigan

Jaquilynn Huff

Rachel Kornetsky

Shawn Larner

Carrie Larsen

Mychaela Moore

Carolyn Muckelberg

Callie Padway

Kevin Rodgers

Richard Rodgers

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Emily Sydor

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