

Playworks Transforms Elementary School

Social-emotional learning intervention works to improve school climate.

By David Wicklund
From *Playworks*

The K-12 education system is changing. There is a new push for social-emotional learning interventions in elementary schools nationwide. Educators and lawmakers are starting to place as much value on helping young people to develop social emotional skills, such as leadership, collaboration, and conflict resolution, as they do on traditional academic work to create more well-rounded citizens.

Many of these lessons, however, cannot be taught in the classroom. Playworks is proving that kids develop many of these critical social-emotional skills on the playground. I have

seen these changes firsthand at Pinewood Elementary School in St. Paul, MN.

Playworks is a national non-profit leveraging the power of play to transform children's social and emotional health. Through direct-service coaching and training, they partner with elementary schools, districts, and after-school programs to integrate games into recess and create a welcoming place for every child on the playground.

Remember recess? Back in my day, recess was one of the most treasured parts of the school day. Yet, in my 15 years of teaching, I have noticed a shift on the playground. Kids don't seem to know how to play

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anymore. They rarely interact with their peers and many times choose to stay on the sidelines. Conflicts that arise on the playground often carry over into the classroom and disrupt learning time. At Pinewood, Playworks has helped transform our playground and school.

The Playworks method is simple. They facilitate safe, healthy play during recess as a tool to help combat bullying, minimize discipline issues, increase physical activity, and reclaim learning time in the classroom. The nonprofit places full-time coaches to assist with activities in schools where 50% of the student population is considered high need. Personalized training is offered to faculty in other schools to implement Playworks programming independently.

Programming includes using games to implement problem solving within the classroom; junior coaching that teaches leadership skills; recess sessions that promote conflict resolution, exercise, and fun; and after-school interscholastic leagues that teach youth components of team sports. At Pinewood Elementary, 30% of the student population is of color and more than 50% receive free or reduced lunch.

For the past two years, we have partnered with Playworks to try a more thoughtful approach in engaging students and building a more united school community. A full-time Playworks staff member works onsite year-round to run all Playworks programs during recess and after-school programs. Our Playworks coach serves as an adult role model for students as well as a mentor to staff.

The results speak for themselves. Before bringing Playworks into our school, recess was often stressful for the staff. Students didn't have clear tools for conflict resolution, teachers dreaded conflicts coming back to classrooms, and administrators viewed recess as problematic for sustaining high-quality supervision and compliance.

Now, recess is viewed as a giant classroom—a space for learning and growing. Students play with each other, taking turns, problem-solving, and interacting in positive and productive ways. Teachers are witnessing a faster transition from recess back to the classroom, and students return happier and more engaged in learning.

Beyond academics, we now see students wanting to belong, be involved, and care for one another. They are starting to

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build confidence, leadership skills, and a better understanding of how they fit into the world around them. Empathy is one of the common social-emotional skills I see students developing through play. The ability to recognize and support others in and outside of the classroom is equally important as the ability to read and write. Playworks has been integral to building a stronger more united school culture.

A recent review conducted by the RAND Corporation and commissioned by The Wallace Foundation confirmed that Playworks offers one of the few social-emotional learning interventions for elementary schools that meet the highest criteria for evidence of impact under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Under ESSA, federal funding is distributed to states and school districts to pay for evidence-based learning interventions that impact a variety of outcomes, including enhanced school climate. The goal is to provide K-12 students a well-rounded education that facilitates improved school climate and safety, relationship building, and workforce readiness.

Playworks was one of three elementary school programs

that ranked in the strongest tier of evidence on eight or more outcomes, including class readiness, on-task behavior, transitioning from recess to learning, bullying, inclusiveness, student ownership of recess activities, student safety, and student use of positive language.

Any elementary school or district can become a Playworks partner by utilizing a number of funding sources to bring the programming to their playgrounds and classrooms. Funding is available under ESSA and national or local grants. Some schools tap into existing budgets, and PTOs often find ways to engage families and school staff to raise funds in their communities, or garner support from local companies and individual donors. For schools in which more than 50% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, Playworks substantially subsidizes the cost.

Play and recess can be a powerful tool to ensure students feel safe in school and have fun while learning. Playworks is reimagining recess and using play to teach valuable social-emotional skills that will build stronger communities and shape the next generation of leaders. ■