

An Evaluation of the Playworks Relay Program in Aurora Public Schools

Executive Summary

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Overview

Researchers have established evidence that recess provides cognitive and academic benefits, social and emotional benefits, and physical benefits to children during the school day. Over the past two decades, Playworks has been instrumental in working with schools to actualize these benefits, with study findings that show support for the effectiveness of Playworks, or indirectly maintaining Playworks mission by confirming the benefits of a high-quality recess. For example, previous research indicates that access to equipment (Erwin et al., 2012) and levels of cooperative play (Leff et al., 2004) at recess have a positive effect on children. Moreover, adult engagement can increase levels of play at recess (Massey et al., 2018a) and be an important moderator for physical activity of girls during recess (Massey et al., 2020). Recent data also showed that a high quality and organized recess can benefit children's executive function, emotional resilience, and classroom behavior (Massey et al., 2021). Evidence from research conducted directly with Playworks has shown that implementation of Playworks increases adult engagement and positive interactions on the playground, as well as decreases conflict (Massey et al., 2017); Playworks helps with conflict resolution skills (Forston et al., 2013; London et al., 2013); Playworks increases physical activity levels of both girls and minority groups (Bleeker et al., 2015; James-Burdumy et al., 2016); and Playworks can help improve school culture (London et al., 2015). Additional data from Playworks evaluations have also evidenced direct benefits for children enrolled in the Junior Coach Program (Massey et al., 2017; Massey et al., 2018b).

Previous evaluations of Playworks have focused on their "Coach" program, in which a full-time employee is assigned to one-school in which they: (a) work full-time at the school to lead and organize games and activities that empower students and school staff to take control of the recess environment in a positive way; (b) work directly with teachers and students during "Class Game Times" which promotes more physical activity and helps to establish rules, boundaries, and expectations that extend to recess; (c) provide student leadership opportunities through a Junior Coach program, in which students are recruited and trained to become leaders amongst their peers; and (d) provide after-school programming and physical activity opportunities through sport leagues.

In consideration of new service models there is a need to examine both the effectiveness of Playworks services that deviate from the original Coach program, and the nature of variations in service delivery effect outcomes amongst certain demographics. Given this, the purpose of this evaluation was to investigate/explore the impact of the Playworks Relay Program in Aurora

Public Schools (Colorado), as well as examine factors that can enhance the program's fidelity and favorable impact. The Playworks Relay model provides comprehensive support delivered by a trained Playworks Site Specialist on site up to 10 days per month who implements strategies, games, and systems to develop and sustain a positive recess culture.

Key Findings

1. **Children reported feeling significantly lower levels of feeling unwelcome at recess** based on race, religion, disability, family income, first language, school performance, hobbies, and appearance across the four time periods. At the end of the school year, the odds of feeling unwelcome at recess were 40% lower than at the beginning of the year.
2. **Increases in adult support decreased the odds of feeling unwelcome at recess.** Higher perceptions of adult support lowered the odds of feeling unwelcome by 25%.
3. There were small, but significant **positive changes in positive affect, negative affect, belonging, victimization, and attraction to physical activity.**
4. **The children who struggled the most at the beginning of the year saw the most benefit.** The largest changes across the school year came from children who scored below the scale mid-points at baseline. These changes were observed for improvements in positive affect, negative affect, belongingness, victimization, adult support, psychological needs satisfaction, and attraction the physical activity.
5. **Girls and gender non-conforming students were at the highest risk of feeling uncomfortable at recess.** Across the school year being a girl or not conforming to a gender binary increased the odds of feeling unwelcome at recess by 29% and 43% respectively. However, girls and gender non-conforming students and reported significant improvements in negative affect and victimization across the school year that were not observed in boys.
6. **Students who identified as racial minorities saw significant improvements in belonging across the school year.** Belonging remained constant across the four time points for White identifying students.
7. **Students articulated their thoughts on Playworks and what they would do if they were the "President" of Playworks.** Students voiced that they want their interests

amplified, increased supervision with respect for fairness and simultaneous freedom to “let kids ‘Be’” and “More...” of many aspects of recess including interaction and engagement with adults, variety of games/activities, and greater inclusion for all.

8. **School principals reported the need for additional training of school staff by Playworks to ensure the Relay program is successful.** Principals noted that if the Playworks staff is not at the school fulltime, more is needed to ensure consistency in the program, and cross-training of staff. They also noted the need for Playworks coaches to be both independent, as well as integrate into the school system, and the importance of buy-in across multiple stakeholders in the school community.

Protocol

Data collection occurred at four time points during the 2022-2023 school year (August 2022, December 2022, March 2023 and May 2023) using a multi-faceted and mixed methods research approach. The evaluation of the Playworks Relay Program was guided by the following three aims:

1. Examine a variety of psychosocial and affective aspects of children’s recess experiences over time in the Relay program.
2. Assess school principals’ and administrators’ perceptions of changes in recess before and after the implementation of the Relay program, as well as school principals’ assessments of the Relay program service delivery model.
3. Investigate children’s perceptions of recess with the Playworks Relay program.

Recess Experiences (student report): Children’s’ (N= 1, 048) recess experiences at 9 schools receiving the Playworks Relay program were examined through a survey that included validated questionnaires which assessed: positive affect at recess, negative affect at recess, belongingness at recess, victimization at recess, adult support at recess, attraction to physical activity, psychological needs satisfaction at recess, and feelings of being unwelcome at recess. Children completed the survey at 4 time points during the 2022-2023 school year to allow for examination of changes over time in the Playworks Relay program.

Principal and Administrator Perceptions (interview): Nine principals or school administrators (i.e., assistant principal, dean) were interviewed at the beginning and end of the school year. Interviews focused on the history of recess at the school, changes observed over time, the role of Playworks in facilitating changes, satisfaction or lack thereof with the Relay program model, impact of the Relay program, critical success factors of the Relay program, and areas of growth and change that need to be considered.

Student Perceptions (focus groups): Twenty focus groups with approximately 120 students (5-6 each) were conducted with 3rd, 4th and 5th graders across the nine schools. Six questions and printed maps of the playground and surrounding environment were utilized to facilitate investigation/exploration of children's perspectives about what recess means to them, who plays where and what happens there during recess, thoughts about Playworks, and ideas they had about making recess more fun, safe, and inclusive.

Recess Quality (Observation): Data on observable changes to the recess environment were measured using the Great Recess Framework – Observational Tool (GRF-OT). The GRF-OT contains 17 items that each describe in short detail critical aspects of a quality recess environment. Items include questions about the safety of the recess environment, number of adult supervisors, access to equipment, availability of play/games during recess, student initiation of play, levels of activity, physical conflicts, communication, conflict resolution, adult support for play, and transitions.

To learn more about the study, please contact Playworks (info@playworks.org).