Playworks: Using Recess to Create a Positive School Climate

What is one of the most serious “pain points” for elementary principals, according to a recent survey? Recess.

The reason, say the leaders of Playworks, a national nonprofit that promotes positive engagement in play as a tool to improve school climate: recess is often an opportunity for adults to take a break from education and leave kids to their own devices—without direction, guidance, or support for positive behavior.

The group’s TeamUp program, now in its second year, is the subject of a new brief from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, “Building a Culture of Health Through Safe and Healthy Elementary School Recess.” TeamUp is a partnership with elementary schools that provides an on-site coordinator to teach, model, and empower a sustainable recess program. The brief describes the experiences of five elementary schools with the program during the 2015-16 school year. It provides a set of clear guidelines for how to make recess a positive and productive part of children’s school experience.

Central to the brief—and to the importance of the Playworks program—is a 2013 policy statement about school recess from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The recommendations are:

1. Recess is a necessary break in the day for healthy child development and should not be withheld for academic or punitive reasons.
2. Children and adolescents need regular breaks from concentrated classroom work to improve cognitive processing and academic performance.
3. Recess is a complement to, but not a replacement for, physical education.
4. Recess can serve as a counterbalance to sedentary time and contribute to the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day, which is strongly supported by AAP.
5. Recess should be safe and well supervised. Environmental conditions, well-maintained playground equipment, and well-trained supervisors are the critical components of safe recess.
6. Peer interactions during recess are important for developing skills such as communication, negotiation, cooperation, sharing, problem solving, and coping. These are foundations for healthy child development and a positive school experience.
Operating primarily in urban schools, Playworks is active in 23 different metropolitan areas throughout the country. In 2012, notes Jennette Claassen, Playworks’ director of evaluation, a randomized controlled trial of the Playworks program was done with 25 different schools. The study found that Playworks reduced bullying, helped to recover time for teaching and learning, and contributed to children feeling safer at school and being more physically active.

Some school districts have eliminated recess completely, while others have rethought that policy. For example, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) had a no-recess policy until 2011 but then reintroduced recess, which is now an important part of the district’s overall strategy. Playworks focuses CPS staff members on the importance of play, the power of play to bring about positive change, and specific techniques and strategies to accomplish this. Playworks promotes child-led play, where children get to choose what to play in a context where adults are modeling respectful and inclusive treatment of their peers. With the support of organizations like Playworks, CPS is recognizing recess as a resource for school success and acknowledging the opportunity for growth it offers the entire school community.

“One of the insights we’ve gained over time,” says Elizabeth Cushing, Playworks’ president, “is the Playworks approach changes the school culture overall, and the whole school day will go better. The adult-child interactions will change. School will become a happier, more engaging place to be. And that leads to better academic outcomes.”

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