

Building a Culture of Health Through Safe and Healthy Elementary School Recess



Executive Summary

A safe and healthy recess promotes a Culture of Health in schools by providing students time to develop socially, emotionally, physically, and academically. During recess, students learn and practice important social and emotional skills, such as conflict resolution, decision-making, compromise, and self-regulation. They also have opportunities for physical activity, and to engage with peers and adults who they might not see in their classrooms. These benefits make recess an important addition to classroom activities, not a “break” from learning that can be shortened or eliminated in favor of more instructional time. School leaders who are responsible for recess policies generally understand both the value of recess and the importance of making recess safe and healthy for all students, but many also report they need more recess staff, more equipment, and better training for their recess monitoring staff to realize these goals (*Gallup, 2010*).

Playworks’ TeamUp program offers schools a site coordinator who supports and trains school recess staff, and models how to sustainably implement a safe and healthy recess. This brief describes elementary schools’ experiences implementing a safe and healthy recess with the TeamUp program.

Key Findings

Setting the Stage for Safe and Healthy Recess

- **An engaged principal is key.** A sustainable change in school recess culture is possible only with committed school leadership. It is critical for leadership to promote the value of safe and healthy play at recess and how it can support the school’s academic goals.
- **School district leadership can create a supportive culture.** School districts can support safe and healthy recess by prioritizing positive school climate and elevating the status of recess by creating policies to support recess for every child every day. Districts can also adapt existing job descriptions so that schools can hire recess monitors whose sole responsibility is overseeing recess, and ensure they have appropriate planning and training time.
- **Dedicated, supported recess staff are critical.** An adult at recess whose responsibility it is to establish relationships with students through play will support students’ social and emotional development. More specifically, this adult also can practice inclusion, use positive language, prepare equipment for use, organize games, and ensure students are engaged and conflicts are resolved safely and quickly.

School Contextual Factors Supporting Safe and Healthy Recess

- **Schools should align recess goals with schoolwide goals and procedures.** Using a flexible set of strategies, schools can promote safe and healthy play at recess. For example, many schools have programs to build character or support conflict resolution; these can be seamlessly integrated into recess strategies.
- **Recess must be integrated as an essential part of the school day.** Many educators recognize that recess is a cherished part of school. Aligning recess with skills learned in physical education classes, and allowing every child to go to recess every day are strategies for integrating recess into the school day.
- **Formal assessment is needed to support a safe and healthy recess.** Many school leaders are not trained to recognize a safe and healthy recess; their key indicator regarding recess is the number of office referrals that come from it, which is just one marker of recess safety. It is critical to have a reliable assessment framework that can be administered in schools to target specific areas of need for improving recess.

Embedding Playworks' Strategies to Create a Culture of Safe and Healthy Recess

- **Strategies for increasing student engagement at recess.** Recess is one part of embedding social, emotional, and physical health in a school, and supporting recess demonstrates that health is valued at the school. Schools can make recess more engaging for students by designating specific areas for games, applying common rules to games, and having appropriate equipment.
- **Creating a positive recess culture for adults.** Adults experience stress related to recess monitoring and transition back to class. Schools implementing TeamUp experienced reductions in the number of disciplinary referrals from recess and an increase in student resolved conflicts. Staff also reported declines in recess conflicts spilling back into class. Creating a safe and healthy recess supports adults' job satisfaction and reduces the time associated with resolving conflicts and helping children cope with recess disappointments.
- **Promoting students' social and emotional development.** Creating a safe and healthy recess requires attention to students' academic, social, emotional, and physical development, and acknowledges the important links between them. As schools attend to this, adults and students will experience the benefits of aligning practice to developmental needs.

Recommendations

- 1. State and district policy should protect recess for all students.** State and district policy can support recess by requiring daily recess, prescribing a certain number of minutes of recess, prohibiting withholding recess as punishment, and offering recess monitors training and planning time.
- 2. Treat recess plans like lesson plans.** Like classrooms, recess needs a leader and a plan for organization, conflict resolution, interactions, and transition. Supporting children's natural desire to play is critical so that they have the opportunity to engage in activities that will aid their overall development.
- 3. Recognize the important role of recess in building a positive school climate, which in turn is a key to student success.** School climate is a key contributor to student academic success. Connections between peers, connections between students and adults, and feelings of physical and emotional safety at school are basic tenets of a healthy school climate and should be esteemed core values that all schools strive to achieve as they build a Culture of Health. States should consider using school climate and environment as the non-academic indicator in their state plans for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act.



Introduction

Recess is an important part of the elementary school day and a complement to the academic instruction provided during class time. During recess, elementary students can engage in unstructured play, which helps them learn and practice important social and emotional skills such as conflict resolution, decision-making, compromise, and self-regulation. They also have opportunities for physical activity and to engage with peers and adults who they might not see in their classrooms. These benefits make recess an important addition to classroom learning, and not a “break” from learning that can be shortened or eliminated in favor of more instructional time in an effort to improve academic outcomes (*Pelligrini & Bohn, 2005*). Indeed, research demonstrates that elementary school recess plays a critical role in supporting a child’s academic, social, emotional, and physical development (*Milteer et al., 2012; Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2002*).

Therefore, establishing safe and healthy recess is essential to promoting a Culture of Health in schools. Yet recess is not a required subject for most elementary students—just eight states have laws that require or suggest recess for students (*Slater, Nicholson, Chriqui, Turner & Chaloupka, 2012*). But despite the relative absence of state policies, school leaders who are responsible for recess policies understand both its value and the value of making it safe and healthy for all students. A recent RWJF/Gallup poll found that 96 percent of principals believed recess has a positive impact on social development and 97 percent believed recess has a positive impact on general well-being (*Gallup, 2010*). Still, 77 percent of principals reported they continue to take recess away as punishment for misbehavior and 87 percent recognized that recess is a source of many of their disciplinary incidents. In order to turn recess time around, principals reported they needed more recess staff, more equipment, and better training for their recess monitoring staff.

Done poorly, recess can be an unstructured time that students and adults experience as challenging. It can be a time when students feel emotionally or physically unsafe, feel excluded from or unwelcome to play, or where conflicts escalate to office referrals.

But there are ways for all schools to create a safe and healthy recess. The American Academy of Pediatrics describes many of these practices in its policy statement on recess (*Murray & Ramstatter, 2013*), and research shows that implementing practices such as

Six recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics regarding school recess

- 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.

(*Murray & Ramstatter, 2013*)

these can improve recess and overall school climate in low-income elementary schools (London, Westrich, Stokes-Guinan & McLaughlin, 2015). When schools pay attention to their recess programs and provide an organized, inclusive, and supported recess, students experience positive social and emotional development.

Playworks is a national non-profit organization that aims to help schools bring safe and healthy play to recess and the entire school day. Among its strategies, Playworks assists schools in providing common rules to games, offering simple-to-use conflict resolution tools, having adults play alongside students, and promoting an inclusive playground. Earlier research has found that, when compared to schools not participating in Playworks, those taking part have seen: Increases in the use of positive language on school recess yards, increases in perceptions of student safety, reductions in bullying, and easier transitions to class (Fortson, James-Burdumy, et al., 2013).

In this brief, we discuss the experiences five schools had with Playworks during the 2015-16 school year as they aimed to create a sustainable culture of safe and healthy play at recess. Each school started in different places of recess readiness, but they experienced many of the same challenges and issues as they took ownership of recess during the year. We also highlight findings from a nationwide survey of approximately 1,300 administrators, teachers, and recess staff at schools implementing Playworks in the 2015-16 school year.



Helping Schools Provide Safe and Healthy Recess

Each of the five schools chronicled in this brief implemented the Playworks TeamUp program in the 2015-16 school year. Through TeamUp, Playworks offers schools support, training, and in-person modeling to implement a safe and healthy recess. The program provides a Playworks site coordinator who works with school-designated recess staff to teach, model, and empower a sustainable recess program (*Playworks, 2016*). The site coordinator spends one week a month at the school and works with school leadership, staff, and students to:

- organize the play area with multiple games that can be sustained at once;
- implement a junior coach program for older elementary students to help others at recess;
- establish common rules to games;
- use simple conflict resolution tools, such as rock-paper-scissors;
- foster positive language and inclusive play; and
- encourage adults to play alongside students at recess.

The program design is intended to support schools while they gradually take over ownership of their recess culture and as such, schools are responsible for:

- identifying a designated recess coach to facilitate safe and healthy recess at school;
- providing access to recess for every child each day;
- supporting a junior coach program that allows older students to mentor and play alongside younger students; and
- allowing sufficient training and capacity-building time for school staff.

The schools selected for the study come from five different regions of the country. Two schools were new to Playworks, two were in their second year of implementing TeamUp, and one had just transitioned from a more intensive level of Playworks services to TeamUp.

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Key Findings

Setting the Stage for Safe and Healthy Recess

An Engaged Principal is Key

The single most important factor in changing the culture of recess at schools is leadership with an intention to do so. The administrative leadership at the school is responsible for creating and amending policies, allocating funds, setting priorities, and motivating staff. In doing so, principals face a variety of competing priorities and necessarily must focus their efforts on academic success for students. Therefore, it is critical to recognize how a safe and healthy recess can support the school's academic goals.

Two of the five principals we interviewed were personally responsible for bringing Playworks TeamUp to their schools. In the other schools, either the principal started at the school after Playworks had been implemented or the school district office offered Playworks to the principal. Support for the program, and a sense that the program fit into school culture, was strongest when principals were responsible for initiating contact. One said,

I was hoping [Playworks] could help us build a stronger school culture by specifically working on stronger culture at recess. This a school community that when I came into this school had more fights than days of school...I figured bringing in Playworks would help us address more organization, build a culture around it. I really like some of the models how peers handle conflicts. I thought it would also help with building students in the culture in terms of having student coaches and taking that kind of ownership.

Playworks staff recognize the important role the principal plays in ensuring recess is safe and healthy. In one region, a Playworks leader told us

Where we have a principal who's willing to have a meeting with the point person at recess, the program's been incredibly successful. In the schools where we haven't had quite the engagement from the principal, it's been somewhat less successful.

School District Leadership can Create a Supportive Culture

Two of the five schools we visited were in school districts that had adopted Playworks district-wide. In these districts, support for safe and healthy recess was embedded in district culture, which provided an extra level of support. For instance, in one district, the district staff stepped in to create trainings and supplemental professional development to help schools that experienced turnover in their recess coaches, and organized meetings among the recess staff across schools to discuss experiences and best practices in recess organization and support. On the other hand, when a school is part of a district-wide adoption of Playworks, principals may be less familiar with the program and less directly invested in the idea of improved recess or supporting improvements to overall school climate.

Dedicated, Supported Recess Staff are Critical

Having adults on the playground who understand and are equipped to support safe and healthy play is essential to creating a positive recess culture. They can help students be inclusive, model positive language, and develop both peer-to-peer and student-to-adult relationships that are so important for positive school climate. This adult also can ensure that equipment is out and ready for use, that games are organized and students are engaged, and that conflicts are resolved safely and quickly.

Most schools do not have such a person on staff. In Playworks TeamUp, schools were asked to identify a “recess coach” to be the point person at the school who would receive professional development and coaching and lead the school in promoting safe and healthy recess. In most schools nationwide, recess is staffed by paraprofessional “monitors” whose primary goal is to maintain safety. It is generally not part of their job description to engage students in healthy play or model the norms of safe and healthy play by playing alongside students.

Staff position titles and responsibilities are generally the domain of the school district and recess coach is not currently a staff title that exists in most districts. The four of five schools in our study that hired a recess coach had to get creative. In one, the principal selected a coach from among the existing recess team, giving the coach heightened responsibilities on the playground. In another, the school assigned a rotating group of teachers to act as recess coaches and monitors. The three other schools hired coaches, but these paraprofessionals also needed to be engaged in other duties (e.g., lunch monitoring) and in all four schools with recess coaches, hours were capped by district policies limiting paraprofessional work time. This left no time for recess planning and extra professional development.

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School Contextual Factors Supporting Safe and Healthy Recess

Schools Should Align Recess Goals with Schoolwide Goals and Procedures

Playworks promotes a flexible set of strategies to support recess, which schools can further adapt to align with their overall goals or programs. Playworks regional leaders saw this flexibility as very important to sustainability over time, but noted it also had the potential to positively or negatively affect recess culture. For instance, at one school the principal decided to use a rotating set of teachers to support recess instead of hiring a recess coach, with the idea that teachers know their students best and having them play with students at recess would allow them to interact in new ways that would promote enhanced school climate. And when teachers were out on the recess yard, all agreed this goal had been met. But teachers had other school-related priorities that sometimes took precedence and recess did not flow as intended when they were not present to support it.

All five schools had a plan to build character or support conflict resolution, and it was important to integrate Playworks into those existing plans. Four of the five schools we visited used Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which supports a continuum of behavior support for all aspects of the school day. Schools with PBIS therefore needed to integrate their recess strategies with their PBIS strategies. One teacher at a school with

PBIS said, “We’re taught how to work with the kids when there are issues and what types of incidents need to be escalated [to the principal]. Other things...we’ll sit down with both sides of the party.” A principal at another school described having three different systems and needing to integrate them into one,

Instead of having a separate bullying program, [we now] implement that into our PBIS...We have Playworks conflict resolution, and then we have the one that’s been in effect since before Playworks, which was ‘Break it, fix it’, so we have three different things.

In some cases, flexibility was more personal. One coach hugged her students to create a personal connection to them, others gave high-fives. In schools that used a “talk it out” approach to conflict resolution, this replaced the standard Playworks approach of rock-paper-scissors. In schools that had taught students to identify and name bullying, the word “bullying” was used as a way of recognizing all types of misbehavior, from exclusion to threats to physical safety. Some of these strategies built core recess values better than others, but a school’s ability to adapt a recess approach that aligned with their existing policies and programs was essential for program acceptance and sustainability.

Recess Must be Integrated as an Essential Part of the School Day

Many educators recognize that recess is the most cherished part of the school day for most students. And yet most schools pay little attention to how their policies and practices supported a positive recess environment. Every school we visited scheduled recess every day for every child, although the amount of recess time varied. Recess periods tended to last 15-20 minutes total, including transition time to and from recess, but some schools had two recess periods and some had one.

Some students were required to sit out recess for a variety of reasons, including behavioral issues in class or at lunch and incomplete schoolwork. Withholding recess is a common consequence for misbehavior in school because it is viewed as one of the few privileges in the school day that students can experience, and it is one that matters most to them. The American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement on recess cautions against withholding recess as a punishment (*Murray & Ramstatter, 2013*). Taking a more pro-active approach to conflict resolution both in class and at recess can diminish the need for withholding recess. School policies that specifically address this issue and reinforce the critical role of recess in school climate are one way to reinforce health as an esteemed value.

Schools also integrate recess into the day by connecting it to physical education (PE). All schools we visited had a PE program. In three schools, classroom teachers taught PE, in one school there was a PE teacher (a former Playworks coach who was credentialed), and in one school the person hired as recess coach doubled as a PE instructor. Schools can build into the PE curriculum and message to staff and students that the variety of skills students learn in PE can be used during recess, and this will aid in creating and sustaining a safe and healthy recess culture.

Formal Assessment is Needed to Support a Safe and Healthy Recess

As part of TeamUp, Playworks designed a “Great Recess Framework” (GRF) to help their staff evaluate recess quality using a more formal assessment protocol. The GRF includes multiple measures for assessing different aspects of recess, including logistical and organizational practices, policies that support recess, social-emotional practices that support recess, and conflict resolution. The ultimate goal is to provide capacity building to school staff and leaders about recess needs. The GRF is currently being validated, and a version is being developed that may be used by any school, regardless of Playworks affiliation, to self-assess and make changes to improve the safety and culture of recess. We anticipate a summer 2017 release of tools to support safe and healthy recess.

This ability to self-assess is critical to sustaining a high-quality recess over time. Having a self-assessment tool will help school leaders take greater ownership of their recess period. One regional Playworks staff member told us:

I think the most profound thing that I learned last year from TeamUp, which I still think is true, is that it's not so much about training the recess aides at schools, it's really about training principals. It's about training principals to use the GRF to assess their own recess, know what to look for out at recess, and then work with their recess aides on performance assessments and goal setting and help them with an implementation plan.

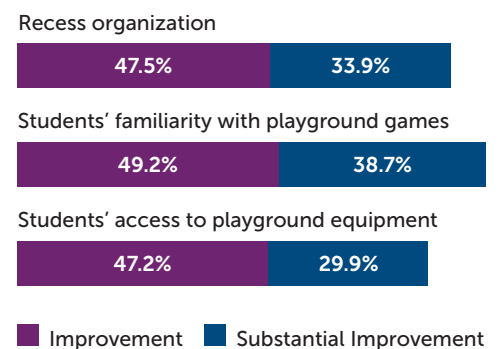
As the GRF becomes more widely available, it can help all schools improve the quality of their recess.

Embedding Playworks’ Strategies to Create a Culture of Safe and Healthy Recess in Schools

Increasing Student Engagement at Recess

It is easiest to engage school staff around the most obvious purpose of recess—allowing students time to play. Schools can increase student engagement in recess through some simple organizational changes such as designating separate areas for each game, establishing common rules to games, having appropriate equipment, and making that equipment available to students at the start of recess. In a nationwide survey of school staff implementing the Playworks TeamUp model, overwhelming majorities reported at least some improvements in students’ access to playground equipment and familiarity with playground games, as well as overall recess organization (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Changes in Recess Organization as Reported by School Staff



Source: Authors’ tabulations from Playworks annual survey. Sample includes 1,328 teachers, support staff and administrators nationwide from Playworks TeamUp schools who completed the survey.

These simple changes were apparently very important to the recess culture at schools we visited. When asked how Playworks has affected the school environment, one principal told us:

The active play with kids with ideas and choices of something to do is the [best example]... [The coach] hauls all of our playground equipment out there now so there's stuff ready for them to go. The field is set up. When they walk out and they see the soccer cones out there, it's giving ideas to kids... I think that's probably the biggest thing is just put that mindset that this is an active play area.

This demonstrates a theme we heard across schools. In prior years, students had a hard time conceptualizing what they might play at recess and they needed some encouragement to engage in play activities. Having an organized recess yard and games they know how to play helped them to see the play options more clearly. A recess aide at another school described it as follows.

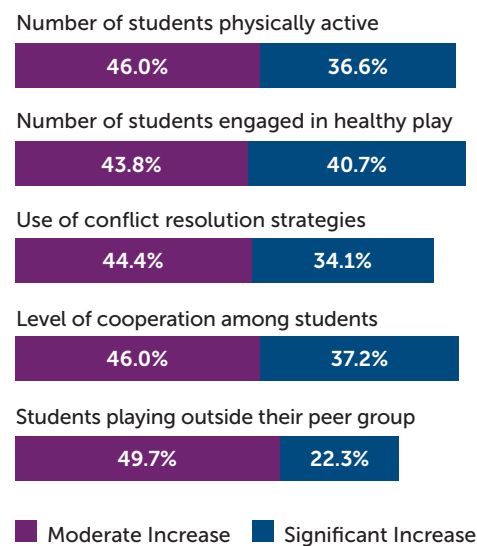
[Students] hung out at the wall and complained there was nothing to do. They kind of forgot how to play. And so I think Playworks has [shown them] that when they come out, they're supposed to play. They're supposed to run. They're supposed to jump. They're supposed to do things...We don't see folks coming out or kids just sitting on a stair...They are learning to play.

Changes like these remind adults that children want to play, but they may need some help in starting their games.

Staff at Playworks TeamUp schools reported large changes in engagement at recess during the school year, with the majority of survey respondent indicating more students were physically active, engaged in healthy play, using conflict resolution strategies, cooperating with each other, and playing outside of their peer groups (Figure 2).

Respondents at the five schools we studied also reported that having adults play alongside students was an important way to engage students in play. This happened both at recess and through separate "class game times" when Playworks staff engaged with one or two classes to teach them game rules, model healthy play, and encourage teachers to play alongside students. Through these activities, adults at school learned the value of having adults and students play together. One teacher told us, "When a teacher or an adult is in a game there's so much more enthusiasm...[Coach] comes and he's in the middle of something, and they all glom onto him." At another school where teachers are the recess monitors and each watch one game station, a teacher told us, "The teacher engagement has been one of the biggest crucial elements...having an adult in that particular area and the kids looking forward to playing with [him or her]." Another principal described the recess coach at the school:

Figure 2: Changes in Students' Recess Experiences as Reported by School Staff



Source: Authors' tabulations from Playworks annual survey. Sample includes 1,328 teachers, support staff and administrators nationwide from Playworks TeamUp schools who completed the survey.

They respect her because she's teaching them how to play the different games. She's involved with them. She plays with them. I think if she was just the one person who was giving all the rules and then not actively participating with it, I think it would be a little different...She's playing by the rules, and so they do the same thing.

Creating a Positive Recess Culture for Adults

Another theme that emerged from the schools we visited was the ways in which students' behavior at recess could cause stress among the adults. Adults told us that previously, monitoring recess could be stressful when student conflicts escalated or students did not follow safety rules. A teacher described it as follows:

We started with a very strong training and most of the staff were really, really energized about this new model of recess. When you don't have a level organization of recess it's even more stressful. It's more stressful to be on duty than it is when you really have a lot of structure.

A principal described how Playworks helped to reduce playground stress for a former recess monitor who is now the school's recess coach.

She's out there and she's done a really great job this year of being more patient. There are days when she gets frustrated, too. Obviously, when people aren't listening to you it's frustrating, but she definitely tries her best to be positive. [Playworks has] definitely made a difference in the way that she's interacted with the kids...I've seen the changes from her really trying to just be hard and hard-lined and a dictator, versus now maybe a little bit more soft, a little bit more positive in her reactions and what she's trying to do and listening more maybe. So the program has definitely shaped her into a better leader.

Recess coaches themselves noticed and liked the difference. Adults who played with students enjoyed their recess duty more than they had previously. They recognized the importance of interacting with students on a different level and being part of the game to understand how students experience recess. One recess coach in a city we visited even lost 40 pounds in the course of the school year from the increased physical activity. A recess staff member at another school told us:

I think as a recess staff I know I've enjoyed it a lot more [this year]. I like gabbing with my friends, but it's been a lot more fun to see our kids in a different element than just when they're fighting...It's been neat to look over and see [teacher] playing basketball ...it's been neat to see each other in a different light.

Reducing disciplinary incidents and referrals is also a major part of reducing adult and child stress during recess. At every school we visited, staff described reductions in the number of disciplinary referrals from recess and an increase in student resolved conflicts. In a staff survey of schools implementing Playworks TeamUp nationally, the majority of respondents

indicated that with TeamUp, the school experienced declines in disciplinary incidents and bullying, as well as reductions in the number of conflicts coming back into classrooms and the time spent resolving these conflicts (Figure 3).

School staff and administrators in the five schools felt that creating a safer recess led to reductions in disciplinary incidents. One school administrator told us:

That level of keeping students safe and learning responsible play, that's a very active program in terms of minimizing bullying. Teaching students how to play respectfully was really appealing. Then on the other end that helps minimize negative behavior that then takes time away from class, can take time away from administrator roles.

Teachers specifically reported that the transition from recess back to the classroom was stressful for them in prior years because students who were unhappy with their recess experiences shared their distress and teachers could spend a considerable amount of time helping students to cope with problems that arose at recess. The transition process itself can be disorganized and simply moving children from the playground back into school can be problematic or take considerable time. Through TeamUp, recess staff learned tools to help students smooth the transition back to class by lining up. Recess coaches would engage students in call and response activities while they were waiting to return to class so that when teachers came for their students they were lined up and ready to go. In the staff survey, 60 percent of teachers said that the amount of time it took to transition back to class declined after Playworks was implemented. One teacher we interviewed told us that this made a big difference for her.

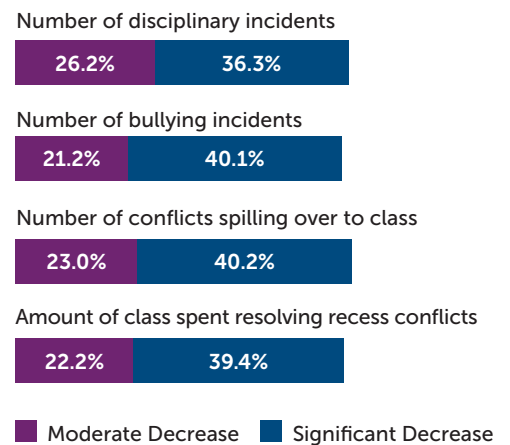
Classroom referrals declined because of issues that were happening on the playground, we weren't getting those anymore. Just because there was that opening and close to recess time, and so the kids knew when they came in recess was done. That was great.

Promoting Social and Emotional Development for Students

Some recess staff recognized the pivotal role recess can have in their students' development. One recess coach, who was new to the school, told us, "Our games teach other skills as well, social skills, impulse control, fitness, and all that, but I think number one is just being able to put all that aside and have some fun."

Positive peer interactions were an important part of creating a pro-social recess environment. One principal told us:

Figure 3: Changes in School Discipline as Reported by School Staff



Source: Authors' tabulations from Playworks annual survey. Sample includes 1,328 teachers, support staff and administrators nationwide from Playworks TeamUp schools who completed the survey.

I think the relationship is the most important part because kids learn how to deal with each other and learn how to look at each other positively and learn how to deal with kids when it's not positive, when they have a disagreement.

A teacher took this concept farther by discussing the role conflict resolution plays in promoting positive peer relationships, supporting physical activity—because students spending less time arguing and more time playing—and readiness to learn—because they're not arguing as they return to class.

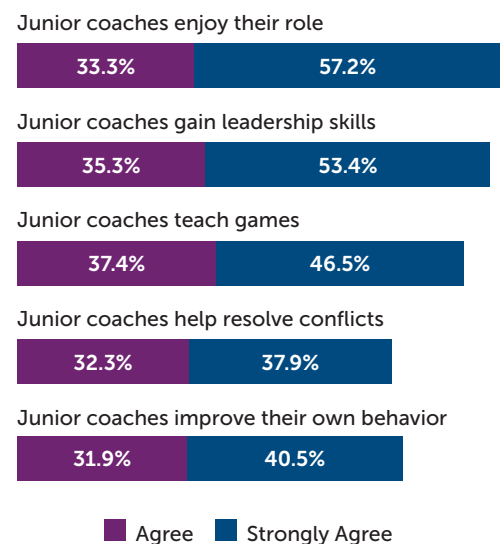
The students are able to solve their problems easier and a lot more quickly. They don't seem to escalate as quickly because they are given some strategies...They actually go out there and they play, so they come back, all of them are tired.

Leadership development is one strategy for building social and emotional skills of students, and a junior coach program is one way to promote student leadership. In Playworks, junior coaches are 4th and 5th grade students who are trained to be recess supports to their peers, and sometimes younger students. They help set up and put away equipment, and can run a game station to help students follow the rules and resolve any minor conflicts. Playworks staff worked with school staff to select students who were already natural leaders in class and on the playground as well as those who were not. In some cases, students who dominated the playground in sometimes negative ways were selected to be junior coaches so they could learn to channel their natural leadership tendencies to help other students.

All five of the schools we visited had a junior coach program, but it varied quite a bit across sites. In most schools, the junior coach role was limited, in part because they were only able to train with Playworks site coordinators for one week a month. In one school, junior coaches were not allowed to leave class to work at other students' recesses because, the principal told us, there were almost no students at grade level academically and students could therefore not be let out of class. At another school, students helped to set up the equipment and space for recess, but did not work with younger students at their recesses. In one school, junior coaches really shone. This was a school that transferred from a more intensive model of Playworks to TeamUp, so the students were familiar with the junior coach program and their leadership role at recess rolled out more smoothly than in the other TeamUp schools.

Regardless of the level of implementation, junior coaches felt they were making a difference in school. We conducted focus groups with them and learned their perspectives on their role and how they felt Playworks had affected their schools. They reported that they especially liked interacting

Figure 4: Junior Coaches and their Roles at Recess



Source: Authors' tabulations from Playworks annual survey. Sample includes 1,328 teachers, support staff and administrators nationwide from Playworks TeamUp schools who completed the survey.

with their Playworks coach who came once a month, leading games at recess, playing with younger children, and being a role model, although they experienced these outcomes at varying degrees. Still, youth leadership is an important way for students to develop social and emotional skills and to practice self-confidence and self-regulation. It is therefore a useful tool for helping all kinds of students, including those who are very shy and reluctant to engage as well as those whose energy sometimes needs to be corralled on the recess yard.

In a survey of school staff, respondents felt the junior coach program was beneficial to the students. Overwhelmingly they felt junior coaches enjoyed their roles and gained leadership skills. They also acknowledged that junior coaches provided recess support by teaching games and helping students to resolve conflicts. They even improved their own behavior in many cases (Figure 4).



Recommendations for Building a Culture of Health Through Safe and Healthy School Recess

Recess is an important part of a school's climate and Culture of Health. When recess helps students engage in safe and healthy play through a supportive system of pro-social development and conflict resolution, it builds a Culture of Health that positively affects children and adults.

This brief has described the ways that five elementary schools and approximately 1,300 school staff members nationwide have implemented a strategy to create a safe and healthy recess. Based on these findings, we recommend several improvements to recess-related policy and practice that can help build a Culture of Health in schools:

- 1. State and district policy should protect recess for all students.** This includes policies that require daily recess for students, set a recommended number of minutes for recess (as is often done with physical education), offer alternatives to removing recess for misbehavior or missed school work, and offer flexibility to recess monitors so they have time for training and planning.
- 2. Treat recess plans like lesson plans.** Every teacher comes to class with a lesson plan to ensure that learning outcomes for the day are met. Recess should be no different. With a recess plan in place, schools can help students to make choices about what and how they will play, but still allow them to make decisions about their free time. The scaffolding of children's natural desire to play is critical so that they have the opportunity to engage in activities that will aid their academic, social, emotional, and physical growth.
- 3. Recognize the important role of recess in building a positive school climate, which in turn is a key to student success.** School climate has been shown to be a key contributor to student academic success. Positive school climate itself is an important outcome because connections between peers, connections between students and adults, and feelings of physical and emotional safety at school are basic tenets of a healthy society and should be esteemed core values that all schools strive to achieve as they build a Culture of Health. States should consider using school climate and environment as the non-academic indicator in their state plans for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act.

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Acknowledgments

This study was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We thank Playworks national office and regional offices in six locations for their support and thoughtful input. Excellent research assistance was provided by Ethan Chang. For inquiries about the study, please contact Rebecca London at rlondon@ucsc.edu or 831-459-5376.

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