

Playworks: Scaling a Great Idea

Jill Vialet and Marjorie Nightingale 23 October 2012

There are so many nonprofit organizations and social entrepreneurs with great ideas. The difficult part seems to be scaling and expanding these great ideas. Jill Vialet, founder of Playworks, and her colleague Marjorie Nightingale, Director of Playworks Philadelphia, write about their experience scaling Playworks nationally, setting up shop in Philadelphia, and growing their network of supporters, including funders, schools, volunteers, and parents.

Introduction

Ask any parent or teacher and they will tell you: the way children feel at school, the way they are treated by both adults and peers, and the degree to which they are accepted have a combined, direct and measurable impact on achievement. America's children deserve public schools where they feel inspired, safe, and cared for—a reasonable expectation by any account. Yet many schools have lost the ability to create such environments for their students.

Thankfully, the national conversation about how to improve America's public schools is broadening beyond

test scores and teacher accountability to consider the role that school climate plays in children's ability to learn in school. Philadelphia children deserve this kind of broad attention to their education. And that is why Playworks came to Philadelphia in 2010.

Getting Started

Getting Started

Playworks, founded in 1996, is a U.S.-based nonprofit organization that has grown from initially serving two public elementary schools in Berkeley, California, to now reaching more than 170,000 children in 375 schools in 23 urban cities across the country. The organization is the only one of its kind, providing play and physical activities to low-income urban schools throughout the school day and during non-school hours. To support broad adoption of its innovation, Playworks also provides training to schools of all income levels and located in rural, suburban, and exurban communities.

Playworks' key focus is on recess, but its impact is felt throughout the school day. Outcomes include decreased bullying, increased attention in the classroom, and increased physical activity.

Playworks had been growing steadily in the Bay Area up until 2005, when Jill Vialet, Playworks' founder, was awarded the Ashoka Fellowship. Ashoka provided an

important foundation for thinking more deeply about scale and helped Jill to articulate her vision that one day every child in America would get to play every day. Ashoka also introduced Playworks to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).

RWJF embraced the vision that play was fundamental to children's physical and emotional health and development. An initial investment was made through the foundation's Vulnerable Populations portfolio to replicate Playworks' model in three cities outside of California. The partnership with RWJF has been critical to Playworks' success in achieving scale. The foundation's willingness to work through the challenges of growth alongside Playworks' leadership created a unique opportunity to talk openly about mistakes. This was critical as Playworks purposefully developed a culture that encourages experimentation as a means of ultimately achieving success.

Why Recess and How Does It Work?

Why Recess and How Does It Work?

Recess can either contribute to the learning environment or detract from it. In too many public elementary schools, recess has become the most concentrated time of conflicts, discipline issues, bullying, and teasing. As a result, many students return to class frustrated, angry, and therefore unable to learn. Some students even end up

missing hours of valuable learning time because they are in the principal's office or suspended.

Playworks supports learning and expands social and emotional skills by stopping the chaos at recess, shifting behavior from negative activity to positive engagement, and teaching teamwork, conflict resolution, and leadership to all students at each school. These focused activities, delivered by one full-time employee in each of Playworks' direct service schools, contribute to children's individual development, ultimately increasing student focus in the classroom and allowing teachers more time to teach instead of resolving playground issues.

A 2012 evaluation brief released by Mathematica Policy Research and Stanford University concludes that Playworks has statistically significant impact in several areas of school climate and classroom behavior. The brief shares results from the first cohort of a two-year randomized control trial evaluation (Bleeker 2012).

Key findings in Playworks schools include:

- Decreased bullying and exclusionary behavior on the playground.
- Decreased transition time from recess to instruction.
- Improved behavior and attention in class.

These findings confirm what Playworks' customers (principals and teachers) say about the program: it has a clear and significant impact for students, teachers, and

the learning environment.

Playworks' Regional Growth

The magnitude of the RWJF investment has not lessened the importance of other investors. The Genesis Group has been instrumental as a partner in working with RWJF to help Playworks solve working capital needs. Securing a line of credit to help manage the cash flow challenges of billing urban public school systems represented a real obstacle to achieving sustainability. Genesis' willingness to offer a line of credit in addition to contributing to national expansion was critical to overcoming this hurdle.

Playworks also intentionally designed the RWJF investment to encourage matching investments from local foundations to help pave a path to sustainability. The Philadelphia Eagles played a critical role in bringing Playworks to Philadelphia, and nationally, funding from corporations and foundations—including New Balance, Mattel, Colorado Health Foundation, The Boston Foundation, and Kaiser Permanente—have propelled both national and regional growth.

Playworks in Philadelphia

Playworks in Philadelphia

While Playworks had achieved significant success over several years of operations in cities such as Baltimore, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Jose,

Playworks has only been in Philadelphia since 2010.

Playworks chose to come to Philadelphia for two primary reasons: first, there was, and continues to be, a critical need in the urban elementary schools here; and second, Philadelphia offers Playworks an important proof point for districts across the country. If school climate can be successfully impacted here, other school leaders will certainly take notice.

Since launching in 2010, Playworks Philadelphia has directly impacted the lives of over 9,000 Philadelphia school children. In the 2012–13 school year, Playworks is serving 15 schools and 7,100 students daily.

Philadelphia wasn't an easy launch for Playworks. It was, at first, difficult to persuade principals and others that focusing on recess could result in greater changes. Yet the timing seemed just right, as educators and families alike have come to the conclusion that innovative solutions are necessary to give Philadelphia's children what they deserve.

It is, indeed, a challenging time for public education in Philadelphia. The looming fiscal crisis and uncertainty about how public education will be delivered make even the most dedicated public service programs uncertain of their viability. Yet, in this environment, Playworks Philadelphia is thriving and expanding.

It is important to note that parents are driving Playworks'

expansion across Philadelphia. They see how positive social and emotional learning create positive school climates where bullying and violence decrease dramatically, ultimately improving learning. Parents tell us that their children's need for quality education can't be put on hold while the district's problems are sorted out. Their children deserve to be in safe environments now. As school budgets continue to shrink, and funds for even basic services diminish, these parents are looking to the broader community to fill in the funding gaps. Whether it is running bake sales or reaching out to corporate partners, parents have taken the lead in ensuring that Playworks expands to serve more schools and more children.

Impact in Philadelphia

Impact in Philadelphia

While Playworks focuses its program on the playground, the overall school climate and student behavior *both on and off* the playground are being transformed. According to a 2011 survey of over 2,500 teachers and principals in Playworks schools, negative behaviors decreased and positive behaviors increased in both playground and classroom. The impact of Playworks was dramatic during the first year of programming. One school reported that incidents of students being sent to the principal's office had dropped by 75 percent in the first year of Playworks.

Principal Huie Douglas at Charles Drew Elementary School reported that referrals for violent incidents dropped from 40 the previous year to 4 after one year of Playworks, thus enabling the school to be removed from the list of “persistently most dangerous” elementary schools. In Playworks’ most recent survey of Philadelphia teachers and principals, 87 percent of respondents reported a decrease in disciplinary referrals to the principal’s office, and 97 percent of respondents reported a positive impact on overall school climate.

How Is Playworks Innovative?

How Is Playworks Innovative?

First, no other program focuses on play and physical activity throughout the school day. Incorporating the tenets of play and positive, social behavior in this way ensures that it sticks. Children receive repeated reinforcement from the Playworks coach at recess, in the classroom from their teachers, and even through interactions with other staff during activities that take place before and after school.

Second, Playworks coaches reach every child in the school, not just those students who struggle the most with behavior issues or those who are least active. This approach makes it possible to shift the climate for everyone at the school, creating a ripple effect far beyond the actual play and physical activities. And it is a virtuous

cycle. As individual children have more fun, feel safer, and get in trouble less often, the experience for all students at recess improves. Soon students begin using Rock-Paper-Scissors when there is a disagreement in the classroom about who was first in line. High-fives and words of encouragement take over where insults and teasing used to happen. Teachers feel more pride as they watch their students solve their own conflicts, and as a result they become more at ease with their students. Stronger teacher-student relationships form, and the cycle continues.

Third, while principals invite Playworks into their schools to specifically address chaos at recess, Playworks ultimately has much larger impact. Educational indicators improve, including a reduction in discipline issues and suspensions and increased focus in the classroom. And physical and mental health indicators improve, including participation in physical activity, safety, and feelings of being cared for.

Finally, Playworks has created a powerful role for young adults in improving the well-being of children in their communities. Playworks coaches are typically in their 20s, have worked with children before, and desire to have meaning and create change through their work. By offering a full-time employment opportunity with significant professional development and high expectations, Playworks is developing a workforce that has much to offer both the education and health sectors

when they leave their role as recess coach.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

Bigger is different: Getting to scale has not meant that Playworks can do more of the same. To the contrary, the leadership team quickly learned they needed to do things very differently, including hiring people with significant functional expertise in finance, IT, human resources, and most notably (and painfully) management. One of the hardest lessons was that the very approach that contributed to initial success—the scrappy willingness to do whatever it took—was at odds with what Playworks needed to scale, namely disciplined systems.

People, people, people: Growth made it more clear than ever that the single most important resource Playworks has is its people. The greatest determinant of Playworks' ability to achieve local sustainability is the Executive Director of each city, and that person's ability to generate social capital that can be translated into effective staffing, development, and visibility. Active local funding partners are essential to this equation, and in Playworks' most successful cities, funders have gone far beyond simply writing checks to being advocates for the ideas behind the organization. A great example of this is the Open Society Institute in Baltimore, where the foundation has complemented their grants with support for a local

conference and funder breakfasts to encourage greater local traction.

Communications is part of every solution. In conjunction with their first investment in Playworks, RWJF also funded a three-year contract with Fenton Communications. While this was a significant departure from how Playworks had operated before, since 2005 communications has become an essential element of Playworks' strategic approach. The goal is to change the national conversation about the importance of play for promoting learning and physical activity in schools so that Playworks' solution makes sense within the larger discussion of school reform. With this support, RWJF compelled Playworks to integrate a communications plan into every aspect of operations, both internal and external.

Jill Vialet has worked for more than 25 years in the nonprofit sector, focusing her entrepreneurial skills on creating and developing two successful nonprofit organizations. Now CEO, she founded Playworks in 1996, seeding the organization in two Berkeley, CA schools. This year, Playworks will serve more than 170,000 students daily in around 380 schools in 23 cities around the country. Jill is graduate of Harvard University. In 2004 she was selected as an Ashoka Fellow. In 2009, Jill and Playworks were selected as a member of the Clinton Global Initiative. She was recently named to the Forbes Impact 30 as one of the 30 leading social entrepreneurs worldwide.

Marjorie Nightingale is the founding executive director of Playworks Philadelphia, launched the Playworks Philadelphia office in 2010 with 12 schools and in less than three years has grown the organization to 16 schools. She spent over fourteen years as a child welfare attorney in Baltimore, representing kids in a variety of difficult circumstances and advocating for positive change on their behalf. Marjorie transitioned into the nonprofit management by successfully launching the Philadelphia office of Dress for Success and winning a national service award for her work there.

References

References

Bleeker, M., S. James-Burdumy, N. Beyler, A.H. Dodd, R. London, L. Westrich, K. Stokes-Guinan and S. Castrechini. (2012, February). Findings from a Randomized Experiment of Playworks: Results from Cohort 1. Report submitted to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.