

# Implementing Play-Based Learning Across Illinois Kindergarten Classrooms:

## Recommendations from Teach Plus Early Childhood Fellows



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# INTRODUCTION

Play has long been seen as the important work of children. According to research, play comprises “personal choice, control, feelings of power, opportunities to be nonliteral (rearranging the world to match what a child wants), intrinsically motivated, and pleasurable feelings.”<sup>1</sup> We are a group of early childhood educators from across Illinois. As Teach Plus Early Childhood Educator Policy Fellows, we are interested in how providers across the state create developmentally appropriate, play-based kindergarten classrooms.

Research shows that play impacts children in positive ways. It supports social, emotional, and academic growth. Children who engage in play-based learning “have greater language skills than nonplayers, better social skills, more empathy, more imagination, and more of the subtle capacity to know what others mean. They are less aggressive and show more self-control and higher levels of thinking.”<sup>2</sup> When children learn through play, they are able to apply and practice skills they have learned through a teacher’s instruction. “Child-driven educational methods sometimes referred to as ‘playful learning’ are the most positive means yet known to help young children’s development,”<sup>3</sup> which is why offering dedicated time to engage in play during the school day is important.

In addition to the many benefits of play, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) began to require that all kindergarteners be evaluated using the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) in 2017.<sup>4</sup> KIDS is an observational tool and in order for it to be implemented with fidelity, teachers must observe students during play-based learning experiences. This has helped to bring play-based learning into sharper focus.

Play can take on a variety of forms, and the two we discuss in this brief are **guided** and **student-initiated play**. Guided play, also known as teacher-directed play, is play that has rules, such as board games or phonics games. Student-initiated play is child-directed and open-ended, giving children the autonomy and creative reign.<sup>5</sup>

For the purposes of this brief, we use the term “**play-based learning**” as the system of using “play” as a tool within the classroom. Play-based learning is often implemented as a combination of guided and student-initiated play throughout the day. In this brief, we look at the impact the implementation of play-based learning has on kindergarten students as well as the benefits and barriers to incorporating play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms in Illinois. We highlight the factors that allow for play-based learning at the classroom, building, district, and state levels and provide recommendations for policymakers to help improve the acceptance and implementation of play-based learning in Illinois.

## Findings

1. The implementation of play varies across classrooms, schools, and districts.
2. Barriers to implementing play-based learning include teacher turnover, unsustained professional development, and the lack of appropriate play materials.
3. When implemented, play-based learning has a variety of positive outcomes for kindergarten students.

## Recommendations

1. Standardize the definition of play to improve consistency in the implementation of play-based learning.
2. Require play-based learning across all kindergarten classrooms in Illinois.
3. Ensure administrators are trained in play-based learning as part of their licensure process.
4. Ensure kindergarten teachers are trained in play-based learning as a part of their ongoing professional development.
5. Invest in play materials to help teachers implement play-based learning with fidelity.

## METHODOLOGY

To gather data for this project, we conducted interviews and focus groups with district and school administrators as well as teachers working in four districts that have implemented play-based learning in kindergarten. We developed a set of questions for district administrators, school administrators, and teachers to learn about the districts' play-based learning protocols, how the districts transitioned toward play-based learning, how it has been implemented, and any changes districts have seen in student outcomes since the implementation of play-based learning. We conducted interviews and focus groups with six district-level administrators, two principals, and nine kindergarten teachers across the districts—a large urban district, one mid-sized suburban district, and two small rural districts.<sup>6</sup> All of the districts offer full day kindergarten programs.

## FINDINGS

### 1. The implementation of play varies across classrooms, schools, and districts.

Participants in interviews and focus groups stated that even if the entire district is using play-based learning, the implementation can vary across classrooms within a school, and vary across schools in the same district. Participants indicated that implementation was most consistent when play-based learning was first introduced and implemented in a district or school rather than in an individual classroom. Part of the reason for this is that there are varying definitions of play-based learning. In one large urban district in our study, one administrator said, *“Teachers at school implement play within their comfort level.”*

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*“For the most part, our definitions align. The only comment I have there is that at the principal level, I am not sure if our principal would be able to accurately describe what a play-based day should look like besides what they see in our kindergarten classrooms. I think there is a little bit of a disconnect where the principals leave the definition of play to the teachers because they are not entirely sure what it is supposed to look like.”*

—Kindergarten teacher, large urban district

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Teacher and administrator experience with play-based learning and their philosophy around early-childhood education were also a factor in how much, and what kind of play kindergarteners experienced in each classroom. For example, one of the small rural districts in our study integrates play in academic-focused centers that children rotate through, with a few free choice opportunities,<sup>7</sup> while the large urban district has 45 minutes built into their daily schedules for free choice play.<sup>8</sup> The other small rural district uses the term “purposeful play,” which can be described as a combination of guided play and student-initiated play because they offer both free choice play as well as infusing play into most academic areas.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. Barriers to implementing play-based learning include teacher turnover, unsustained professional development, and the lack of appropriate play materials.**

Our interviews and focus groups highlighted several barriers that make it difficult for teachers to implement play-based learning in their daily instruction. Most districts provided one initial play-based learning training for teachers, but did not necessarily provide ongoing training or training for new hires. One of the large urban districts in our study had a full summer training around play-based learning, but found it hard to train new staff and offer ongoing professional development around play-based learning.<sup>10</sup> Some districts experienced recent turnover and transition with teachers as well as school and district administrators. One district-level administrator said that it was “*difficult to maintain the level of professional development for new staff and principals*” so they did not receive the same level of support in understanding and implementing play-based learning as those who received it at the onset of adoption and implementation some years ago.<sup>11</sup>

Participants also highlighted the lack of funding for materials, space, and other resources as another barrier to implementing play-based learning and creating a play-based environment in the kindergarten classroom. Based on survey responses, teachers do not receive dedicated funding for kindergarten classrooms as they may receive for pre-kindergarten classrooms, so their resources to create a learning environment conducive to play-based learning may be limited.

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***“[There are] challenges in lack of time for planning and materials to create a play-based environment that we envision for our classrooms.”***

—Kindergarten teacher, rural district

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The physical learning environment is important because it sets the tone for how students feel, and therefore behave. Since it is where students and teachers spend most of their time, the classroom needs to be a place where students feel a sense of ownership—it should be organized, comfortable, and reflect the children’s personalities and interests.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, respondents stated that kindergarten teachers did not have enough common planning time to collaborate with other kindergarten teachers or overall planning time to create, prepare, and gather materials to implement play-based learning experiences in their classrooms.<sup>13</sup> This lack of planning time is another barrier to successful implementation of play-based learning in Illinois’ kindergarten classrooms.

### 3. When implemented, play-based learning has a variety of positive outcomes for kindergarten students.

Teachers and administrators alike shared stories of positive outcomes that were a direct result of implementing play-based learning in kindergarten. These benefits include positive academic outcomes, increased and more complex understanding of concepts in later grades, and positive behavioral outcomes such as increased social-emotional awareness when engaging in group work in later grades and fewer discipline-related office referrals. Teacher and administrator perceptions of the student benefits that resulted from implementing play-based learning were overwhelmingly positive.

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*“Play in the classroom has done a great job of engaging students which has led to improved academics. Having students constantly interacting and working together to accomplish things has been great for their social emotional growth as well. They are learning communication skills and what behaviors are acceptable with peers. They also learn how to share and that they are not always going to get their way. Teamwork and communication are very important life skills that are being fostered in a play-based classroom.”*

—Kindergarten teacher, large urban district

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The most noticeable impact of play-based learning was in students' social-emotional skills. All of the participants shared that student interaction was better as a result of play-based learning. One teacher from a small rural district gave an example of a non-verbal student who began the year keeping mostly to himself but communicating more and more with his peers over the course of the year during play-based learning.<sup>14</sup> A principal from the other small rural district said, *“Students have fewer negative behaviors, more conflict management skills, fewer redirections during group work in first grade.”* Play in the classroom has also led to better oral language and vocabulary skills, and higher reading and math achievement in subsequent grades.<sup>15</sup> Another district-level administrator said, *“The amount of student referrals has decreased [because the] teacher can focus more on SEL with play.”*

One unexpected positive that the participants noticed was increased teacher collaboration. One principal said she has seen more vertical alignment between pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and 1st grade.<sup>16</sup> Teachers working together results in more intentional and standards based play-based learning. As teachers planned for play together, they gained a better understanding of developmentally appropriate practice. A district administrator said that she copied indicators from Teaching Strategies Gold (a set of standards used in most Head Start classrooms that has an accompanying kindergarten set of standards) and asked kindergarten teachers what they needed to help support vertical alignment and an understanding of developmentally appropriate practice.<sup>17</sup>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Standardize the definition of play to improve consistency in the implementation of play-based learning.

It is imperative that ISBE adopt a unified definition of play-based learning in kindergarten. Even in districts that are currently utilizing play-based learning in their kindergarten classrooms, only a very loose definition of play-based learning exists. Some districts are implementing only guided play, while others incorporate student-initiated play into their kindergarten classrooms, and still others utilize a combination of the two.<sup>18</sup> This leads to discrepancies in implementation both within schools and districts. In order to make meaningful advancements toward creating play-based kindergartens, there needs to be a state-wide definition to guide the planning and implementation.

## 2. Require play-based learning across all kindergarten classrooms in Illinois.

We recommend ISBE requires play-based learning in daily kindergarten schedules so there is consistency across schools and classrooms in how we prepare and educate kindergartners in our state. Having such a requirement would result in a necessary guidance for districts and allow teachers to implement research-based, effective practices with the support of their administration. We recommend every kindergarten utilizes at least 60 minutes of student-initiated play, as well as periods of guided play built into daily literacy and math blocks.

## 3. Ensure administrators are trained in play-based learning as part of their licensure process.

We recommend ISBE require administrators to receive professional development around early childhood education and developmentally appropriate practices for early childhood classrooms in order to obtain or renew administrative licensure.

Currently, Illinois Public School administrators must attend one Administrator Academy course for each fiscal year of their license's registration period as well as professional development totaling 100 hours in a five-year period to maintain licensure.<sup>19</sup> However, each administrator is able to choose which professional development courses they take based on individual needs and interests. Illinois administrators working in settings with kindergarten classrooms should be offered a variety of courses through Administrator Academy that intentionally focus on play-based learning and other developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms, as well as be required to take a set amount of professional development hours around this same topic. This would allow all Illinois district and school administrators to understand the impact and importance of implementing play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms. Administrators should also be equipped to adequately support, train, and develop kindergarten teachers around play-based learning, and encouraged to align funding and resources to implement and maintain these instructional practices in all early childhood classrooms.

#### **4. Ensure kindergarten teachers are trained in play-based learning as a part of their ongoing professional development.**

We recommend districts provide kindergarten teachers with professional development opportunities to grow in their play-based learning practices. This can include, but not limited to, professional development opportunities provided by ISBE, or school-based professional learning communities and book studies. Districts should leverage KIDS coaches, provided by ISBE, to help support new-to-kindergarten teachers in developing their play-based learning practices.

#### **5. Invest in play materials to help teachers implement play-based learning with fidelity.**

We recommend districts allocate funding for play-based materials in kindergarten classrooms. Classrooms need adequate materials to implement play-based learning and teachers should not be expected to use their own money to purchase supplies. Each kindergarten classroom should receive funding to adequately set up and maintain the physical environment to support play-based learning. The funding should be used to purchase hands-on tools and materials that support skills such as creativity, cognitive thinking, and cooperative play, furniture, materials to encourage pretend play, or art supplies.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since KIDS became mandated in Illinois several years ago, there has been greater focus on play, yet kindergarten teachers have worked to implement play-based learning in their classrooms and complete this play-based assessment without adequate foundation, training, and support. The state of Illinois should, first and foremost, support districts by creating a standard definition of play-based learning and set requirements for play in kindergarten's daily schedules. This will ensure that all kindergarten classrooms implement play-based learning. Illinois should also ensure that administrators receive training in developmentally appropriate practices so they can understand the importance of play-based learning and its role in a kindergarten classroom, and districts must prioritize funding the purchase of appropriate materials teachers need. Only then will our children begin to reap the many benefits of play-based learning.

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## Focus Group Questions (Teachers)

1. How do you feel about play? How comfortable are you with play? Why or why not? Has this opinion changed at all over time? How so?
2. How does the district define play? What does it look like - how much time, structured or unstructured, etc.
3. How do you as a teacher define play?
4. Does the district's definition align with your principal's definition, and does that align with what happens in the classroom?
5. Do you feel supported by your administration around play?
6. How are you supported by your administration around play?
7. How else would you like to be supported?
8. What are the similarities and differences in play across the district? Between buildings? Between classrooms in the same building?
9. Is there anything you would like to change about these similarities and differences?
10. Which do you prefer: structured guidance across the district/buildings, or teacher autonomy within classrooms? Why?
11. What are the 1-2 main barriers to implementing play in your daily instruction?
12. Have you ever received pushback against play? From whom? Could you please share an anecdote?
13. Based on your district, how would you like ongoing support around play - specifically in training?
14. How should new teachers to the district be brought into play?
15. Do you have any specific anecdotes you can share in regards to the impacts of play? If so, please share them now.
16. What are the impacts of play that you've seen - think in relation to SEL, behavior, academics? Do you have any data you can share around these?
17. Is there anything else you would like to add?
18. Are there any questions that we didn't ask that you want to discuss?



## Interview Questions (District and School Administrators)

1. In 3-5 minutes, can you tell us your life story starting with, this is where I was born and finishing with this is how I got into my current position.
2. The idea of play in the classroom can mean different things, how does the district define play and in what ways is that reflected in the policies and supports around play?  
*Ask for examples*
3. Are all of your schools following the same play protocols / how much autonomy does each school have in implementing?
4. Have you noticed any differences in your district before play and after play took hold?  
Have you noticed any differences in students, teachers, academics, or school culture?  
*Ask for examples*
5. What is the racial and socio-economic makeup of the kindergarten classes?
6. How does your district define play? How does this affect daily procedures within your kindergarten classrooms?  
*Ask for examples*
7. Does your district mandate Early Childhood trainings for principals?  
*If yes, what is the mandate?*  
*What other EC admin trainings have admin in your district attended, if any?*
8. What led to the district/school incorporating play into the curriculum? What were your personal reactions to these efforts?
9. How has play changed or evolved in classrooms since you first implemented it?
10. What benefits have resulted from play? Immediate? Long-term?
11. What challenges or any unintended consequences have you experienced?
12. Who else in the district should we talk to about the implementation of play?

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Lillard, A. S., Lerner, M. D., Hopkins, E. J., Dore, R. A., Smith, E. D., & Palmquist, C. M. (2013). The impact of pretend play on Children's development: A review of the evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 139(1), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029321>
- 2 Miller, E., & Almon, J. (2009). In *Crisis in Kindergarten* (p. 7). essay, Alliance for Childhood.
- 3 Lillard, A. S., Lerner, M. D., Hopkins, E. J., Dore, R. A., Smith, E. D., & Palmquist, C. M. (2013). The impact of pretend play on Children's development: A review of the evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 139(1), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029321>
- 4 Illinois State Board of Education. (2021, September 1). *Kids Overview and FAQ 9 1 21 TW - ISBE*. Frequently Asked Questions About KIDS. Retrieved from [https://www.isbe.net/Documents/KIDSWebsiteResources/KIDS\\_FAQ.pdf](https://www.isbe.net/Documents/KIDSWebsiteResources/KIDS_FAQ.pdf).
- 5 Admin. (2020, November 3). *Parents' guide to teacher-directed vs Unstructured Play*. Pathways.org. Retrieved December 2021, from <https://pathways.org/watch/parents-guide-structured-vs-unstructured-play/>
- 6 Focus groups took place in May 2021. Interviews took place between January and March 2021. Interview participants included six district-level administrators and two school principals. Focus group participants included nine kindergarten teachers. Four public school districts in Illinois are represented in this research including one large urban district, one suburban school district and two small rural school districts. All interviews and focus groups were facilitated by Teach Plus Teacher Leaders.
- 7 Interview Question 6: How does your district define play? How does this affect daily procedures within your kindergarten classrooms?
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Interview Question 7: Does your district mandate early childhood trainings for principals? If yes, what is the mandate? What other early childhood administrator trainings have administrators in your district attended, if any?
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Gordon, K. A. (2013). *Early childhood education: Becoming a professional*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- 13 Focus Group Question 11: What are the 1-2 main barriers to implementing play in your daily instruction?
- 14 Interview Question 12: What benefits have resulted from play? Immediate? Long-Term?
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Interview Question 2: The idea of play in the classroom can mean different things; how does the district define play and in what ways is that reflected in the policies and supports around play? Interview Question 9: How has play changed or evolved in classrooms since you first implemented it?
- 19 *Administrator Academies*. Illinois Principals Association. (2021, June 22). Retrieved December 2021, from <https://ilprincipals.org/grow/administrator-academies/>

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