

The Long Island play revolution

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Students flourish academically, socially, and emotionally when a school district starts making time for unstructured play.

In 2015, a school district in New York State declared an educational revolution. Teachers and parents decided to rise up and liberate their schools and their children — by giving them more play.

The revolution erupted at the Patchogue-Medford district on Long Island, which serves 8,700 K-12 students, over half of whom are economically disadvantaged, and it is being led by Michael Hynes, the athletic, passionate young district superintendent. He realized that federal education schemes

based on the compulsory mass standardized testing of children, schemes like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, were proven failures, and he figured it was time to try something new, even radical.

Hynes started following his students around through their typical day and was increasingly alarmed to realize how little recess, play, and self-directed time they got. “We have done a great job of stripping away childhood from our children,” he thought. “We tell kids what to do from the moment they wake up in the morning until they go to bed. They don’t have the ability to take time for themselves, just be kids, to make decisions for themselves.” He remembered his own childhood, and how different things were when he started as an elementary school teacher in the 1990s. “My students were free to play often,” Hynes recalled. “I loved watching them benefit physically, emotionally, and socially. We would go outside three times a day.” A single idea began to dominate his thinking: “Kids must be free to play in school. Childhood itself is at stake. I am sworn to protect children, and I must give this to them.”

Making time for play

For years, Hynes had read about the striking successes of Finland’s school system, and its strong foundation of play in childhood education. It gave him an inspiring idea, and he presented it to his community. And with the strong support of his school board and local parents, Hynes and his team took a series of steps almost unheard of in American public education today, steps that for some politicians and bureaucrats would be shocking, even downright dangerous, and nothing less than pure blasphemy. They doubled daily recess from 20 minutes to 40 minutes and encouraged children to go outside even in the rain and snow. They brought building blocks, Lincoln Logs, toys, and kitchen sets back into the classrooms. They gave each child a 40-minute lunch. They added optional periods of yoga and mindfulness training for K-8 children. They launched an unstructured Play Club for kindergarten through 5th-grade children, every Friday morning from 8:00 a.m. to 9:15 a.m.

They opened “Divergent Thinking Rooms” filled with big foam blocks, where children can negotiate, plan, innovate, collaborate, and construct new worlds of design and architecture together, free from adult interference. A free breakfast program in classrooms was started so children and teachers could eat together every morning. The amount of homework was sharply reduced. Hynes calls the program “PEAS”: *Physical growth, Emotional growth, Academic growth, and Social growth*. It has nothing to do with technology. During the play periods, there isn’t a tablet, laptop, or desktop in use.

In 2018, Hynes sent a letter to his district, informing teachers and students that they were more than a score on a government-imposed standardized test, and they should feel free to toss such test scores in the trash. “We must abandon one-size-fits-all lesson plans and stop drilling to create high scores

on year-end standardized tests,” he argued. “Instead, children should be involved in play, project-based learning, cooperation, collaboration, and open-ended inquiry.”

Based on the available research, Hynes was also no fan of making younger students do schoolwork at home at night. “There is zero evidence, and I mean zero, that there is any correlation between academic achievement and homework for elementary school kids,” Hynes told one journalist (McLogan, 2017). Now, the recommended evening activity for children in his district is to play outside, spend time with friends and family, and read books for a half hour before going to bed.

Seeing the results

When he first proposed that recess time be doubled, Hynes told us, some of his elementary school principals were very concerned, even scared. “They wondered if I’d lost my mind,” he recalled. Some teachers wondered, “How will we make up for the lost instructional time? How are we supposed to teach with less time?” and “Now we’ll never be able to cover all our material. Plus, with all this recess, the children will come back to class all sweaty and jacked up, and all over the place!” and “Oh, my God, this is not even going to be controlled chaos, just chaos!”

But the opposite happened. The students thrived. They managed themselves beautifully once the adults quickly learned to back off and let them play. After recess, the children were more focused and more ready to learn in class. And the students did learn more in class. Discipline problems in the district were cut by more than 50%. Student attendance went up, and reports of student stress and anxiety went down, both in and out of school. Classrooms became places of joy and extra-productive learning. “I have never seen so many happy and well-adjusted children in my 20 years as an educator,” reported Hynes. He thought some parents might object to the radical new play program, but he received zero complaints.

The weekly 75-minute Play Clubs at each of the district’s seven elementary schools are a vivid illustration of a revolution in progress. The school playgrounds are open for the period, as are several designated free-play rooms indoors. Children decide what they want to do. Balls and sporting equipment are put outside, and inside there are plenty of materials and activities for the children to select from. At first, Hynes thought perhaps 20 children per school would show up, maybe 25 if they were lucky, and probably mostly the youngest children, those in kindergarten. He was way off. Soon after opening the clubs, they had an average of 100 children per school from all age groups show up every Friday morning to enjoy self-directed, child-led play, the maximum number they could accommodate, and long waiting lists formed.

There are four adults at each Play Club to make sure nobody gets hurt, but otherwise they are under strict orders to not intervene with the children. “They’re there,” Hynes confided, “mainly so we can tell parents we had someone there.”

The most emotional moment for many of the adults watching the spectacle of the Play Clubs was the sudden realization that children of much different age groups were playing together — a small miracle that educators rarely get to see, since children are usually separated by strict, narrow age groupings. But at the Play Clubs, kindergartners and 1st graders were playing and collaborating with 4th and 5th graders, and vice versa. Older children were mentoring the younger ones. Special needs students felt welcomed by others to play with them.

“This may have been one of the most amazing experiences in my 28 years in education,” marveled Lori Koerner, principal of Tremont Elementary School in the district. “To watch children across all ages and grade levels come together to play was fascinating to observe! This club is self-directed with minimal interference from the adult advisors. Children were communicating, collaborating, cooperating, and learning together.” Barton Elementary principal Judith Soltner agreed, saying, “What was completely unexpected was how the older children took it upon themselves to include and guide the little ones. It was amazing and awesome to watch.” Canaan School Principal Robert Epstein added, “Students are encouraged to utilize their own conflict resolution skills when the need arises. The ability to resolve conflicts without adult intervention is a crucial component to becoming socially competent. The play club provides the opportunity for students to practice interacting and communicating with one another with minimal adult intervention” (Patch-Med Schools, 2018).

A lasting change

The play revolution on Long Island is just getting started, and it looks like there’s no turning back. The district is opening seven new state-of-the-art school playgrounds so students will have better and deeper play experiences. Things are working so well for his students, Hynes reported, “that if I were to try to take this away, I would be bound, chained, and committed by the local population.”

What do the parents of this New York school district think of this great play experiment? The comments Hynes hears most often are: “Thank you for doing this!” “My child loves coming to school now, and doesn’t feel stressed out at all.” “My child can’t wait to come to school!”

“If it were up to me,” Superintendent Hynes told us, “these kids would have over an hour of recess every day.”

“The most important ‘data point’ that I care about is happy kids.”

References

McLogan, J. (2017, October 27). Patchogue schools experiment with expanded recess, less homework. *CBS New York*.

Patch-Med Schools. (2018, January 25). Pat-Med debuts before school play program. *Patch.com: Patchogue, NY*.

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