



# Promoting Purposeful Play

**Schools must continue to encourage learning through play beyond preschool**

**BY LIZ GARDEN**

**“Let them play!”** This phrase has been heard in school communities across the country as more early childhood and elementary administrators find themselves advocating for the needs of their students every day. And coming out of a pandemic—or maybe still knee-deep in one—it appears that students’ social-emotional needs have taken precedence over academic concerns.

Last March, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Massachusetts School Administrators’ Association issued a joint position paper, “Approaches to Intentional and Playful Learning in Preschool Through Grade 3 Classrooms.” Educators in the state have watched the focus shift to rigorous, standards-based instruction over the years, and the paper says something has been lost in that shift: play.

When everyone is concentrating on closing achievement gaps, preparing for standardized tests, and offering mostly teacher-directed instruction, there is little chance for kids to be creative, collaborate, and get excited and engaged through playful learning. Instead of joy in our schools and classrooms, we instead see stress, pressure, and anxiety among our youngest learners.



Research throughout the years points to the importance of play:

- Without sustained, high-quality learning opportunities in preschool through grade 3, any positive outcomes resulting from preschool will likely fade, according to research cited in “Quality Is Crucial to Sustaining Benefits of Pre-K, Studies Stress,” a 2018 article published in *EdWeek*.
- Play-based learning allows students to create, adapt, explore, experiment, learn, communicate, socialize, and problem-solve in a familiar environment with peers and individually.
- Play has an essential role in fueling happiness and intelligence throughout our lives, and it is as essential to our health as sleep and food.

## **INTENTIONAL PLAY**

Walk onto any playground across the country, and you will see kids playing. But walk into any elementary classroom, and chances are you won’t. In kindergarten and preschool classes, you’re more likely to see children engaging in play—sometimes student-directed “free” play or choice time. But what is intentional and playful learning?

Purposeful play means play is integrated into curriculum, instruction, and assessment. We know that play is an integral part of how young children learn, so it makes sense to use it as a leading instructional strategy. By creating a joint position statement, Massachusetts hopes to move the goals for playful learning toward “a broader scope of opportunities that include the development of academic, physical, and social-emotional competencies, addressing equitable learning opportunities and closing achievement gaps for all children.”

## **PLAYFUL LEARNING IN PRESCHOOL**

In preschool and kindergarten classrooms, intentional, playful learning



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can be integrated into the entire school day. Children might work in small groups, one-on-one, or independently. They might engage in shared learning opportunities that allow them to problem-solve, use different materials, role-play, think critically, and act creatively.

It's often easier for an administrator to witness purposeful, intentional play in a pre-K or kindergarten classroom, because they often feature areas for dramatic play and blocks centers. School leaders must recognize and understand that if they walk into a classroom and see children playing, they are observing learning happening.

If you see kindergartners running a pretend movie theater in class and selling tickets, they are learning about number sense and the concept of money. When you see them drawing and writing a concession stand menu to include healthy food items, they are engaging in new concepts of art and design, letter formation, and life science.

### PLAYFUL LEARNING IN GRADES 1-3

Intentional, playful learning will look different in first-, second-, and third-grade classrooms. Students will present at a different developmental level, and their playful learning experiences should reflect that change. You will see more complex, purposeful play. The Massachusetts paper lists key elements of play that school leaders should see in classrooms:

- Play should include investigations, dramatizations, construction, and experimentation.
- Play should be integrated into the curriculum through careful planning that embeds these experiences throughout each day and across days.
- Play should incorporate self-reflection and interdisciplinary connections where children explore, ask questions, make choices, work together, solve problems, and use their imaginations with academic content and concepts.
- Play should create safe places for children to take risks with their learning.
- Play should help develop and practice regulation of emotions.
- Instructors should honor student choice and voice.
- Play should promote self-initiated learning.

When you walk into a first-, second-, or third-grade classroom, do you see these elements? Are you coaching teachers to embed intentional, playful learning throughout the day? A third-grade classroom that engages in purposeful play might not include a dramatic play experience area like a kindergarten classroom would.

Intentional, playful learning in this setting might mean students read online reviews to learn about concepts of written persuasion, or it might mean students get the chance to play with toys and games, and write their own reviews.



When elementary students are given a chance to have a self-initiated learning experience and purposeful play is part of their daily learning experiences, the potential growth—academic and developmental—is limitless.

### BRINGING PURPOSE TO PLAY

As school leaders, we need to engage staff in the discussion of play as an instructional strategy. Form a book group with staff to discuss how you can encourage intentional, playful learning in elementary classrooms beyond kindergarten. "We have forgotten that children are designed by nature to learn through self-directed play and exploration, and so, more and more, we deprive them of freedom to learn, subjecting them instead to the tedious and painfully slow learning methods devised by those who run the schools," *Free to Learn* author Peter Gray says.

It is not an either-or situation—intentional, playful learning and rigorous, standards-based instruction can coexist and support each other. After two years of disrupted development and limited opportunities for children to collaborate and be creative, we must look at this as an integration opportunity. How can we weave playful learning into instruction in order to create and attain deeper learning? Let them play. ●

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