



# Children at Play: An Evaluation of EW/NSCC's Socialized Recess Program

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Research for Action

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### Introduction & Methodology

EducationWorks (EW) contracted with Research for Action (RFA) to research and evaluate its socialized recess (SR) program conducted by Education-Works/National School and Community Corps (NSCC) teams which are based full-time in individual public schools. The purpose of this research was to give EW/NSCC deeper insights into the accomplishments and challenges of the program and to suggest ideas for program improvement.

This research consisted of both in-depth qualitative data collection and surveys of corpsmembers and school staff. For the qualitative research, RFA observed multiple socialized recess periods at four school sites and interviewed thirty-five representatives of both EducationWorks and school staff. For the survey component, RFA conducted the NSCC Recess Survey about recess programming among both corpsmembers (N=27) and school staff (N=35), with the help of NSCC team leaders. The overall response rate was lower than expected, with surveys returned from seven out of 17 schools. Despite the relatively low number of schools and individuals that completed and returned surveys, the survey findings provide useful triangulation for the qualitative data;

thus, we have included survey data in the report as appropriate. Finally, this report draws on data from a separate survey of seventy-five corpsmembers conducted by RFA for EW/NSCC; it provides data about corpsmember training needs relevant to SR work.

### Overview of Findings

This research indicates that the vast majority of school staff interviewed and surveyed thought that NSCC's socialized recess program provided significant benefit to their school.

NSCC teams were, overall, rated very positively by school staff and team members for meeting their goals for socialized recess, despite facing many barriers. Nearly two-thirds of the interviewees, predominantly school staff, made very positive comments, such as, "I'm totally dependent on them," "they do a good job," or "we're doing an excellent job."

Survey data indicates that:

- Both corpsmembers and school staff agreed that recess programs are effective, with 68% of corpsmembers and 69% of school staff reporting that their school's NSCC recess program was effective or highly effective.

- Eighty-four percent of corpsmembers indicated that they were satisfied with the way recess is run at their school, while 71% of school staff were satisfied.
- Overall, 80% of survey respondents indicated that the recess program has improved the school's climate.
- Finally, 78% of corpsmembers and 77% of school staff members responded that recess would be worse if NSCC were to stop running the program at the school.

### *Socialized Recess Goals*

When asked to state the 'goals' of recess time school staff stressed that recess is an important time for students to release energy and to play.

NSCC members and school staff identified three key benefits that socialized recess offers that go beyond regular recess. These were: (1) SR adds structure and contributes to a safer environment for children; (2) through more structured activities children learn important social skills such as how to resolve conflict, play on a team, demonstrate good sportsmanship, and make new friends; (3) children receive emotional support from NSCC team members.

### *Accomplishments and Benefits*

Across all four schools, the three most commonly mentioned successes of the program were: (1) decreased injury and conflict at recess; (2) improved student social and conflict resolution skills; and (3) more productive and enjoyable recess time for students.

Both the qualitative and quantitative data indicate that many believe that socialized recess has resulted in a decrease in injury, fighting, and conflict during recess time. Data from the NSCC Recess Survey revealed that over 70% of both NSCC and school staff groups agree that fighting and aggression among students are chronic problems at the sites, which underscores the importance of NSCC team success in reducing incidents during recess time.

Both data sets also reveal that many individuals feel that the NSCC recess program aids in the important socialization of youth. Seventeen of the 35 interviewees shared the belief that this "socialization" teaches students an important set of skills, such as cooperation, fair play, turn-taking, and conflict resolution.

Qualitative and quantitative data alike also showed that the recess program provided basic enjoyment, fun, and a structured way to release energy. This finding is not surprising given schools' increased focus on academic work with fewer breaks for even very young children. The finding also reflects participants' belief that NSCC's recess programming provides a much needed outlet for children and facilitates positive recess experiences despite poor playground conditions.

### *Challenges*

Across all four schools, the two most frequently mentioned challenges were: inadequate staffing; and indoor recess. These two challenges, as well as four others, are highlighted below.

Staffing was named as a challenge at every school. Thirteen interviewees from a range of positions including administrators, teachers, non-teaching assistants, corpsmembers, and team leaders said that more adults were needed on the playground.

At every school and across roles, eleven interviewees described indoor recess as very challenging. NSCC team members expressed their frustration with indoor recess, where large numbers of children are confined in relatively small indoor spaces that can easily become noisy and chaotic.

At every school, corpsmembers and/or their Team Leader noted that recess equipment is used "hard" by the large groups of children and teams run out of equipment as materials wear out, break, or are stolen.

At all schools, corpsmembers and/or TLs articulated the challenge of conducting recess with inadequate facilities; they wished for better playground conditions. In addition, transitions, i.e., children moving between the school building (classrooms or lunchroom) and the yard, are often difficult.

Three of the four team leaders noted that a key challenge in their role involves keeping corpsmembers motivated for their socialized recess work.

### *Relationships With School Staff*

Most teachers report and expect minimal involvement with recess.

Although, in general, teachers did not highlight increased teacher participation in recess as a need, interviewees across all other groups suggested that teachers be more involved during lunch and recess.

Both teachers and corpsmembers reported some tensions with each other related to socialized recess. These tensions focused around two areas, discipline issues during recess and transitions to and from recess.

At all of the schools we visited, corpsmembers and non-teaching staff reported positive and productive working relationships. NTAs and aides alike voiced appreciation for corpsmembers and their work in the school.

### *Training*

Most corpsmembers feel well-trained for their socialized recess work and the majority of school staff agrees with this assessment.

Most corpsmembers and school staff indicated that corpsmembers are well-trained for their work in socialized recess; however, corpsmembers requested more training in helping children eliminate fighting, managing difficult behaviors, and understanding conflict resolution.

## Recommendations & Implications

### *Staffing*

*Larger teams:* Emphasize the importance of increasing staffing in order to have larger teams. This will allow fuller implementation with more attention to conflict resolution, more activities, and the ability to staff a quiet area for reading and games.

*Improve transitions:* Encourage the involvement of student leaders, parent volunteers, teacher volunteers, and other adults during the transitions from classroom to recess and back to help children especially reenter the classroom ready to learn.

*Customize teams:* Consider the needs of each site when forming teams with special attention to the need for a greater male presence at some sites.

*Seek principals' support:* Share best practices with principals to encourage their support of extra staffing and the use of volunteers.

*Identify substitutes:* Create a substitute or floater bank that can cover absenteeism across schools.

### *Training*

*More training re: behavior:* Increase training for dealing with difficult student behaviors.

*More training re: older children:* Increase training for working with older students as schools transition to K-8 grades.

*Share strategies:* Create ways for corpsmembers and staff to share strategies as a way of gaining support and skills.

### *Programming*

*Stakeholder education:* Educate all stakeholders about socialized recess to help strengthen support and ease implementation.

*Advocate for daily recess:* Be a voice for students' developmental needs.

*Programming for older students:* Prepare new strategies and activities for older students as schools transition to K-8 grades.

*Quiet areas:* Create a recess quiet area for reading and games at each school.

*Indoor recess strategies:* Strive to find ways to improve indoor recess.

#### *Relationships with School Staff*

*Involvement strategies:* Discuss with teachers and administrators the importance of their involvement. Across schools, share creative ways of involving staff.

*Collaborate with staff:* Improve pick-up and drop-off and other transitions.

*Keep sharing the mission of SR:* Communicate the importance of socialized recess as a way of building teacher support.

#### *Physical Conditions/Supplies*

*Improve conditions:* Become an advocate for improved playground conditions by garnering district and community support.

*Community support:* Consider developing ways for community members to assist with the ongoing need for supplies.

*Start small:* Make small improvements to playgrounds as a catalyst for greater improvement or community service projects.