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# Play Based Learning A School Improvement Plan

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# Play-Based Learning: A School Improvement Plan

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

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**Abstract**

Play-based learning is a topic often discussed at the early childhood level. Research has shown play-based learning can lead to success within the classroom in the areas of social-emotional skills, literacy, and mathematics. Research conducted within the Muscatine Community School District suggests children could benefit from additional time in play-based learning opportunities. This school improvement plan describes in detail the process needed to implement a plan to increase the amount of time spent in play-based learning opportunities within the preschool classroom.

*Keywords: play-based learning, school readiness, literacy,*

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# Chamberlin Play-Based Learning

Play Based Learning is a common practice used in many early childhood classrooms. The usage and implementation of play-based learning have seen a significant decline in recent years in the early childhood classroom. This decline is believed to be largely due to the No Child Left Behind Act and the Every Child Succeeds Act, these acts have shifted the focus on kindergarten and school readiness skills and increased the pressures on early childhood teachers who are now faced with teaching more pre-reading and pre-math skills than they were previously teaching. (Lynch, 2015) Children in the Muscatine Community School District spend only about 12% of their school day in play or child-led activities. This is a problem because research states young children learn best when they can learn through play and by openly exploring and engaging in the environment around them. This problem has a significant impact on children in the early childhood classroom. When the amount of time spent in play is low and children have less time in child lead activities research shows it can lead to children becoming less engaged in teacher lead instruction or more traditional "seat work". (Bredekamp, 2005)

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to increase the amount of time children spend in play-based learning or more child lead activities within their preschool day from 12% to at least 40%. This plan will give a detailed description of how this will be implemented within the preschool classroom and describe the benefits of increasing the amount of play in the preschool classroom. The knowledge gained from this research will help administrators, instructional coaches, and other educators get a better understanding of what play-based learning is and the value of play-based learning inside the early childhood classroom. This project will be a great way to encourage collaborative work between the administrative team and grade-level team as they look at the pacing guide to plan for the following school year.

The research for this study was found within peer-reviewed journals primarily in the Dewitt Library or from Google Scholar on the Northwestern College website. Research primarily came from the past ten years; however, some dated a bit further back to give further information on the history of play-based learning. When searching for articles my focus included play in preschool, play-based learning, intentional teaching, child lead learning, interest-based learning, and the impact of play on learning.

In order to best support the children within our early childhood programs it would be in the best interest of the children to increase the amount of time spent in play-based learning opportunities. Children need to have the opportunity to openly explore and engage with the environment around them. Through play, children can develop many social emotional, fine motor, literacy, cognitive, and mathematical skills. Although it is believed these skills need to be explicitly taught, many of these skills can be taught within the play-based classroom through purposefully planned centers or interest areas. These skills are imperative when thinking about kindergarten and school readiness skills.

The literature review will address the following areas: teacher intentionality, social-emotional development, language and literacy, and child-initiated play. The literature review will begin with the findings from the research found on the child-initiated play. This research will discuss the different findings which suggest how children learn different skills through play. The next topic in my literature review will be language and literacy development. This topic will be addressed by discussing the different ways language and literacy skills are developed through play-based learning. Social-emotional development will be the next topic addressed within the literature review. This will be addressed by discussing the different ways this can be developed through play-based learning. The final portion of my literature review will be about teacher

intentionality. Being an intentional teacher when it comes to planning out the preschool day is crucial when discussing increasing the amount of play in the play-based learning environment.

## Review of the Literature

### Child Initiated Learning

Current research states play-based learning is the best practice for young children. However, many people believe children are not able to perform well academically when in a play-based or child-initiated setting. Child-initiated learning has proven to help children across all areas of development some of these areas may include social emotional, physical, cognitive, language, literacy, and math. According to researcher Vaisarova (2022), the use of child-initiated learning activities has shown an improvement in many parts of the child's overall development, one of them being social-emotional development. Vaisarova (2022) also discussed an increase in motivation, self-confidence, and a decrease in school anxiety. (Vaisarova, 2022) Although there were many articles in favor of child-initiated learning there were a few articles in opposition to the idea of it. Researcher Stipek (2006) discusses the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act and Every Student Succeeds Act on the early childhood classroom. Stipek (2006) states "Formal instruction introduced too early, or is too hard or uninteresting, could turn young children off of schooling." Many educators who believe strongly in the idea of play-based learning feel the same way. Lynch (2015) states "Kindergarten classrooms do not look like they did twenty years ago where children were coming to school to play and learn how to share and sing songs. Students in kindergarten have very specific standards and benchmarks they are expected to meet." Throughout the article, Lynch (2015) suggests although there are teachers in support of a more play-based learning environment kindergarten teachers would like to see more data to support claims this is the best practice for children. Lynch (2015) also stated, "Many of

these teachers and administrators question the school readiness skills being taught within the preschool classroom." Lynch (2015) discusses the challenges American schools face, "American public school kindergarten teachers face a lot of scrutiny when implementing play within their classrooms and have started to shift towards more academically focused kindergarten teaching." The child-initiated learning environment is often thought of to be unable to produce children who are school ready. A study done by Vaisarova (2022) found four-year-old children who were enrolled in a child-initiated learning environment had a steady increase in school readiness skills as determined by Teaching Strategies GOLD. Teaching Strategies GOLD is an assessment tool used by preschool teachers based on child observations. Teaching Strategies GOLD assesses cognitive, physical, social emotional, literacy, math, language, and science benchmarks. Research has shown "along with increasing students' math scores, the play-based classroom or child-initiated learning has also been credited to increase students' reading scores." (Taylor,2020) Taylor (2020) discusses a study from 2018 in which there was a control group of children who were taught the same material but given different ways to practice the skills. The play-based classroom had center materials in which related to the targeted skill. The traditional classroom used more worksheets or "desk work" to practice the concepts taught. The study took place over two weeks and resulted in the play-based learning group showing higher learning gains, especially for lower-achieving students. (Taylor, 2020) Even with the significant data in favor of play-based learning, there is still the question of what young children are learning from play and what is considered too much play.

**Language and Literacy**

Research regarding literacy and language development in the play-based classroom suggests the play-based environment encourages development through peer interaction. It is important to note

the play-based learning environment does not replace the need for direct instruction, it does however encourage children to engage in play alone and with peers. A study done by Rajapaksha (2016) revealed "The sociodramatic play intervention implemented within the preschool classroom created a language-rich environment and offered many opportunities to develop oral language skills in children, particularly for children who communicate rarely in the classroom activities." Rajapaksha (2016) brought up some great points which were not always brought up in previous research. Many children are not always comfortable with speaking during large groups or more of the instructional time. When children have opportunities to engage in play, they can develop oral language skills needed within the preschool setting. Rajapaksha (2016) discussed the idea of children developing language within the classroom through play and peer interactions. Researcher Allee-Herndon (2022) completed a study based on this idea. This study explored the effects of two teachers' direct instruction learning environments to test the hypothesis in which kindergarten students from low socioeconomic backgrounds will show greater gains in receptive vocabulary and literacy learning when purposeful play is incorporated. This study went on to show the benefits of play within the classroom but also discussed the need for direct instruction in the areas of literacy and language for skills to develop, especially in children who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. This research showed when teachers did not share the belief about how play can support and develop children's academic skills, then the play environments in their classrooms were likely to reflect this, resulting in fewer intentional spaces and less likely to contain literacy-rich materials. (Allee-Herndon, 2022) Researcher Pyle (2018) states "play is typically distinguished by minimal adult involvement, teachers often use this time to do small group or individualized instruction. However, this research found a literacy-rich environment was generally not enough to ensure students practiced

particular academic skills during free play periods." Although there is data in favor of play-based learning and the skills children develop within the classroom environment there is still the question as to if children are learning school-readiness skills through play.

**Social Emotional Learning**

A large part of the preschool day is spent on social-emotional learning and teaching children how to engage and interact with their peers. The play-based learning environment provides many opportunities to practice these skills. Social-emotional skills are necessary for children to self-regulate. Self-regulation is needed when thinking about kindergarten readiness or school readiness skills. Researcher Siew (2018) states "Children with stronger social and emotional abilities are also able to sustain engagement in classroom tasks, whereas children with weaker abilities face difficulties in maintaining concentration." Siew (2018) states, "Social and emotional competencies also directly influence interpersonal relationships with people in the immediate environment, which in turn may impact the resources available for learning. Children with strong social and emotional abilities engage more in classroom activities and are shown higher acceptance by peers and teachers." A study done by Parsons (2019) discussed an inclusive classroom setting in which children with and without special needs learned how to interact with each other. This study focused on the social-emotional skills children with autism are learning within the classroom environment alongside their typically developing peers. Parsons (2019) states "During play with their peer and therapist, children were allowed to practice integrating the communicative, social, and emotional aspects of their social environment to enact new pragmatic language skills." This intervention model gave children time to learn peer-mediated skills to interact with each other through play. The approach Parson (2019) took to teach these skills was more peer-mediated rather than teacher-directed however many researchers suggest

these skills need to be explicitly taught. Mohamed (2019) states “Preschool teachers as the first educators in a child’s life play a vital role in fostering and nurturing social-emotional development in young children.” The study by Mohamed (2019) discusses the importance of social-emotional learning and how children can develop these skills. “Young children develop social-emotional skills by interacting with nurturing adults and competent peers.” Social-emotional skills are needed for children to be successful within the school setting. Children with good social-emotional skills are found to be more ready to enter school compared to children with low social-emotional skills. (Mohamed, 2019) Social-emotional skills can be learned within the play-based classroom whether they are being taught in a large group setting by the teacher or being taught by peer-mediated interventions during play.

**Teacher Intentionality**

The play-based learning environment is highly dependent on how intentional the teacher is and can completely depend on how they are setting up the classroom environment and the materials within the centers. Many educators and even administrators have a difficult time believing there is a lot of learning going on within the play-based classroom. According to Allee-Herndon (2021) “Quality preschools including purposeful play can contribute dramatically to improved language, literacy, and mathematics competencies as well as improved responses to learning in kindergarten.”(Allee-Herndon, 2021) Research suggests teacher intentionality can have a significant impact on children when it comes to the play-based classroom. Early childhood educator Macdonald (2018) states “It is important to strive to provide an engaging environment where play is the prominent support for and means of learning. But in truth, Macdonald found it challenging. Earlier in her career, she used a didactic approach full of worksheets and drills because it was “expected”. While she saw small amounts of direct instruction as useful, she also

knew play-based learning is essential for young children. She noted play encompasses knowledge building, problem-solving, communicating, and collaborating yet throughout her career she often felt the early childhood field is gently nudging her towards focusing on drills and worksheets." Throughout Macdonald's (2018) research she goes on to discuss the need for teachers to be an observer and an active participant in children's play. Macdonald (2018) states "When the play environment is intentionally created, the learning occuring is as deliberate and logical as any teacher-directed lesson, yet the activities are offered in a manner in which is appropriate to the development of each child." Although there was plenty of data to support the idea of teacher intentionality makes a difference in the play-based classroom there are still many who disagree the play-based learning environment does not produce students who are "kindergarten ready".

## School Profile

The Muskie Early Learning Center is located in Muscatine, IA, and is home to nearly 23,000 residents. Muscatine, Iowa is in the Eastern part of Iowa right along the Mississippi River. Muscatine has a small-town feel with the amenities of a larger town. Muscatine is home to many family-owned businesses, large production plants, and industrial factories in which provide jobs to many community members. The overall population of Muscatine includes people from many different cultures and backgrounds. Some of these include Hispanic 13.7%, African American 3.9%, Asian 0.96%, and Caucasian 74%. (Data USA: Muscatine, IA, 2023) . Within the school district, there are 4509 students in grades Preschool through twelfth. The district has 9 buildings: an early childhood building which houses three-year-old and four-year-old preschools, six elementary buildings, one middle school, and a high school. The district's mission states, "Every student will excel in thinking, learning, achieving, and caring in

partnership with our staff, families, and community." The school vision is, "Every Student is a Success Story" (Muscatine Community School District). Muscatine Community School District continues to make improvements to the many buildings within the district to best support the student learning environment.

According to the Iowa School Performance Profile, Muscatine Community School District has 60.5% white students, 29.5% Hispanic, 4.5% African American, and 4.3% Multi-Racial. 51.1% of the population is male and 48.9% of the population is female. Students with disabilities on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) make up 13.1% of the Muscatine Community School District. Additionally, 5.4% of the population at Muscatine Community School District are English Language Learners (ELLs). 49.5% of all students are classified as having low socioeconomic status. Overall, there is an 84.28% graduation rate in four years compared to the state average of 90.15% graduation rate. (Iowa School Performance Profiles) The Muskie Early Learning Center follows the Iowa Early Learning Standards and uses the Teaching Strategies GOLD assessments. The three-year-old program utilizes the Heggerty phonemic awareness program, Handwriting Without Tears, and Growing with Math Curriculum. The four-year-old program utilizes the Heggerty phonemic awareness program, Handwriting Without Tears, and Engage New York Math. The Muskie Early Learning Center has also begun implementing Conscious Discipline for the social-emotional curriculum.

The Muskie Early Learning Center has one instructional coach who works alongside and guides educators. The instructional coach and teachers meet weekly during collaborative teacher teams meetings where grade-level teams meet. The instructional coach is present at these meetings to help guide discussion and offer input and suggestions to teachers. Teachers are

required to meet with the instructional coach individually at least twice a year, but the instructional coach is available as needed.

Assessment at the Muskie Early Learning Center looks different when comparing three-year-old preschool to four-year-old preschool. Students in three-year-old preschool are assessed using Teaching Strategies GOLD, this assessment is reported on three times a year using anecdotal records. Students in the four-year-old preschool program are assessed using IGDIs (Individual Growth and Development Indicators) and Teaching Strategies GOLD. In addition to these assessments' students at the Muskie Early Learning Center are given a screener three times a year called Get Set for School. Data from the assessments are reviewed by instructional coaches and teachers. From there, changes and modifications are made to instructional practices to best meet the needs of students.

The Muscatine Community School District offers many opportunities for professional development related directly to the field in which you are employed. The Muskie Early Learning Center has provided staff members with full-day and half-day sessions on Conscious Discipline, Specially Designed Instruction, and Curriculum Development. Teachers are also required to complete an Iowa professional development plan each year which addresses a professional learning goal they have for the school year. The plan is reviewed and signed off on by instructional coaches and administration at the beginning of the year when setting the goal and at the end of the year to see if the goal was worked on.

At the Muskie Early Learning Center, parents are a very important part of their child's education. Preschool is unique as it begins the school year with home visits. Home visits are an important way to build relationships between teachers and families. Families are invited to attend and participate in parent-teacher conferences twice a year. Teachers at Muskie Early Learning

Center use the Class Dojo website and app to communicate with families and keep them informed about what is happening within the classroom. Class newsletters are also sent home in folders weekly.

The Muscatine Community School District is a thriving community which continues to challenge and push staff and students to reach their highest potential. However, there are a few areas in which it could use some improvements. One specific area where this district could use some attention and refining is the amount of time spent in play or play-based learning in the preschool classroom.

## Needs Assessment

Based on the information shared previously, the Muskie Early Learning Center's curriculum and instruction are areas in need of improvement. Within the school, there is a lack of curriculum and instructional guidance provided to teachers. Although there have been program modifications and many improvements in the last few years the building continues to struggle with providing teachers a clear guide for what is expected to be taught and how the instruction should be delivered. Instructional delivery varies from classroom to classroom in the Muskie Early Learning Center, with some teachers spending more time in play-based learning opportunities than others and some in more traditional teacher-directed lessons. According to the Iowa Early Learning Standards, "IELS emphasize developmentally appropriate content and skills children may know and be able to do before entering kindergarten" (Iowa Early Learning, 2022). Ensuring our students are getting the very best education and learning in a way which is developmentally appropriate for preschool-aged children should be a priority for the district and Muskie Early Learning Center. A school-wide increase in the overall amount of time spent in

play-based learning or child-initiated learning opportunities which are aligned with the early learning standards would ensure this would happen.

According to Pyle (2017), “Play-based learning has been described as a teaching approach involving playful, child-directed elements along with some degree of adult guidance and scaffolded learning objectives” (Pyle, 2017). Although preschoolers at the Muskie Early Learning Center are spending approximately thirty minutes daily in center play there could be room for more play-based opportunities to be built into the preschool day.

While taking assessments administered at Muskie Early Learning Center into consideration, the assessment tool being used is an assessment based solely on observations. Students in preschool are assessed in many different developmental areas using the Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment. An increase in play-based learning opportunities could give teachers more time to individualize instruction within small groups and center play. This could also give teachers more time to observe children engage and interact within their natural environment. The following plan will address the data and action plan to successfully implement a play-based learning plan to increase the time spent in play and child-initiated learning opportunities for preschoolers at the Muskie Early Learning Center.

## Data Analysis

Data was collected in August of 2022 from teachers at the Muskie Early Learning Center who taught four-year-old preschool and three-year-old preschool with a survey asking approximately how much time was spent in play-based learning or child-initiated learning opportunities. Each classroom teacher responded with an approximate number of minutes spent in play, three-year-old programs were compared to each other as their programs are half-day rather than full-day. Four-year-old programs were compared against each other rather than

compared to three-year-old programs due to the difference in time spent in the classroom. When looking at the classroom data it was alarming there wasn't more consistency when looking at the amount of time spent on play-based learning experiences within the classroom. Below is a table of four-year-old programs and the amount of time within the classroom spent in play-based learning opportunities.

**Figure 1.**

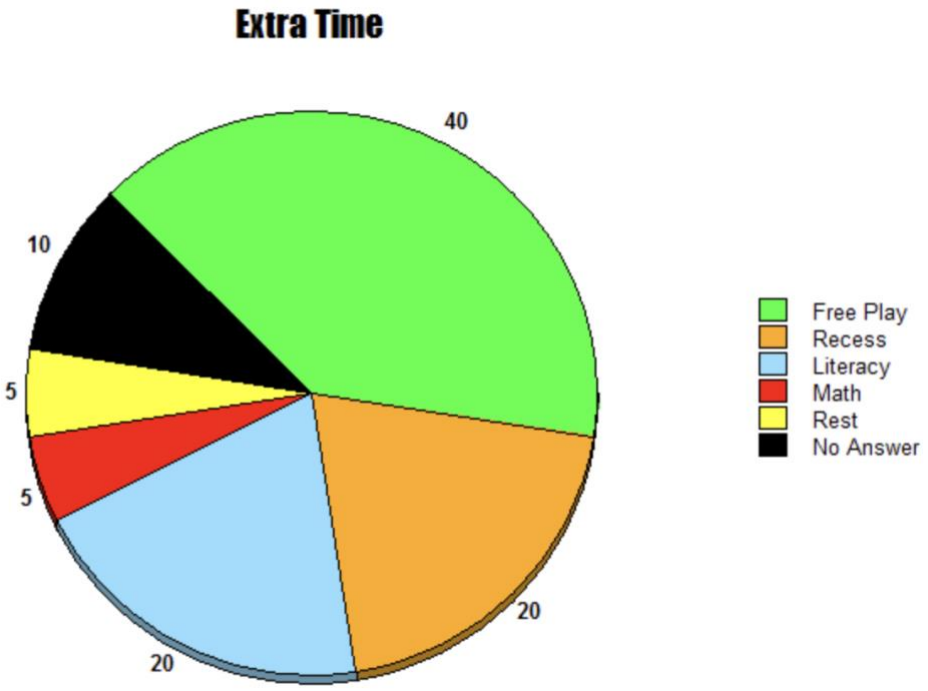
| 4-Year-Old Programs | Amount in Play |
|---|---|
| Classroom 1 | 40 minutes |
| Classroom 2 | 50 minutes |
| Classroom 3 | 45 minutes |
| Classroom 4 | 35 minutes |
| Classroom 5 | 60 minutes |
| Classroom 6 | 60-75 minutes |

**Figure 2.**

| 3-Year-Old Programs | Amount in Play |
|---|---|
| Classroom 1 | 45 Minutes |
| Classroom 2 | 30 Minutes |
| Classroom 3 | 30 Minutes |
| Classroom 4 | 45 Minutes |

Preschool teachers were also sent a Google form asking if they could add more time into their school day and what would it be used for. The results of this are shown in the chart below.

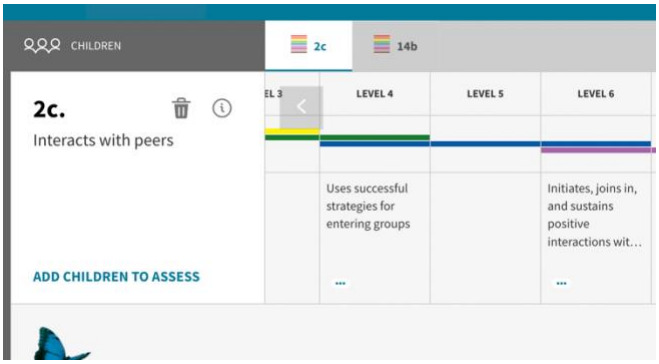
**Figure 3.**

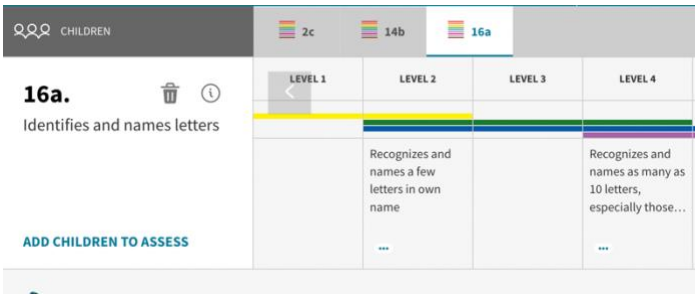


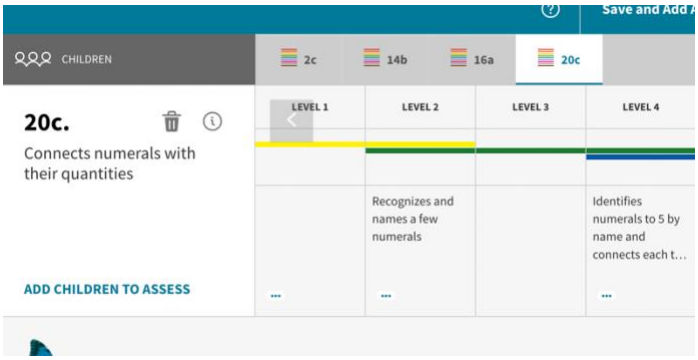

The data suggests teachers at the Muskie Early Learning Center are in support of adjusting the amount of time spent in play or play-based learning opportunities. In a Google survey sent out to two teachers from the Muskie Early Learning Center, who preferred to remain anonymous, when asked about increasing the amount of play time or play-based learning experiences in the preschool classroom it was noted teachers were most concerned with fitting in kindergarten readiness skills. Some of the skills they noted included rhyming, letter-sound knowledge, counting, number identification, positional words, and social-emotional skills.

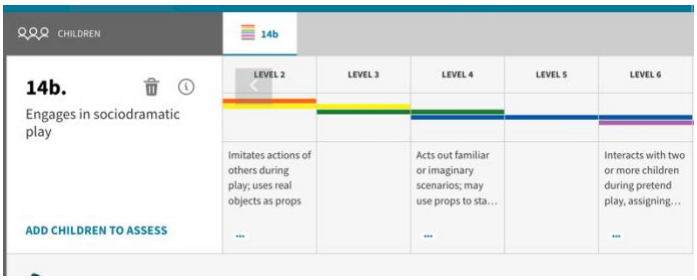
One three-year-old classroom was willing to modify the way small group instruction and learning centers were set up in the classroom. The classroom modified the way the traditional

small group instruction was done. The teacher assigned a peer leader to oversee the center and made sure an adult was close by ready to scaffold the learning. This gave the classroom an extra fifteen minutes of play-based learning before adding time to centers. When comparing the children in this classroom Teaching Strategies GOLD data from the Fall checkpoint to the Winter checkpoint there was some significant growth in the following objectives: 2c. Interacts with peers, 14b.Engages in Sociodramatic Play, 16a. Identifies Letters, 20c.Connects Numerals to Quantities. (Teaching Strategies, 2010)






## Action Plan

Based on the information and data collection provided by the preschool teachers at the Muskie Early Learning Center, action needs to be taken to increase the time in play-based learning opportunities in the preschool classroom. The comprehensive steps to implement a detailed play-based learning guide for preschool-aged students at the Muskie Early Learning Center are laid out below. When implemented consistently, children within the Muskie Early Learning Center will benefit from the many social emotional, and academic benefits of the increase in time spent in play-based learning in the classroom. Before the action plan, it is important to identify research-based strategies to lay the foundation for the plan. These strategies will be applied and embedded throughout the plan.

Before getting into the action plan, it is imperative to identify research-based strategies provide evidence and support for the plan. Researcher Vaisarova (2022) found the use of child-initiated learning activities or play-based learning has shown an improvement in many parts of

the child's overall development, one of them being social-emotional development. Vaisarova (2022) also noted an increase in motivation, self-confidence, and a decrease in overall school anxiety. Rajapaksha (2016) also researched the impact of play-based learning practices within the classroom. Rajapaksha (2016) discovered when children have opportunities to engage in play, they can develop oral language skills needed within the preschool setting. This research was instrumental when determining whether the Muskie Early Learning Center could benefit from additional time being spent in play or play-based learning. Researcher Allee-Herndon (2021) also found "Quality preschools include purposeful play can contribute dramatically to improved language, literacy, and mathematics competencies as well as improved responses to learning in kindergarten." This research was influential in determining whether this plan was needed, and if action was necessary for the Muskie Early Learning Center.

The first step in increasing the time spent in play-based learning or child-initiated learning opportunities would be educating preschool teachers and administrators about the benefits of play in preschool. This step is essential in ensuring whether educators understand what skills can be developed and learned through play-based learning, how they impact a child's development, and the need for strengthening these skills at the Muskie Early Learning Center. This information could be presented to teachers and administrators through a presentation during professional development or sent out in an email. Next, educators teaching preschool will be given an implementation plan to provide details on the increase in minutes spent in play-based learning and child-initiated activities.

This information could be presented to educators through a presentation during summer professional development or end-of-year professional development. This would ensure there is also time allotted for discussion and questions before the start of the implementation of the plan. Next, educators and administrators teaching and working in preschool would need to be introduced to and educated on play-based learning and child-initiated learning experiences they are being asked to implement. It would be essential copies of the implementation plan have been made for each teacher and timelines are ready before the school year begins.

## Implementation of the Plan

The proposed plan will impact teachers at the Muskie Early Learning Center because they will all be learning about the impact of play-based learning and child-initiated learning opportunities within the early childhood classroom. The knowledge will be not only discussed but also begin to be implemented within the classroom. The amount of play-based learning opportunities will increase from thirty minutes daily to sixty minutes daily in four-year-old programs and from thirty minutes daily in three-year-old programs to forty-five minutes a day. Teachers will use Teaching Strategies GOLD Checkpoint data from the previous year when comparing data to check for student growth over time. Teachers will have monthly check-ins with their collaborative teacher teams to discuss progress and any questions or concerns they have about the extra time spent in play-based learning.

Some barriers or challenges could impede the success of this plan could be some pushback from veteran teachers who are more comfortable doing things the same way they have always done them and are a bit resistant to change.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the success of this school improvement plan is likely if this plan is utilized correctly. Currently, children at the Muskie Early Learning Center do not spend enough time in play-based learning opportunities. By increasing the amount of play-based learning opportunities in the preschool classroom teachers and students will both benefit. Research states by giving children access to more time in play-based settings can benefit children in many ways. Language skills are developed through peer-to-peer interactions, and many of these interactions happen within play. Children can learn many social-emotional skills within the play-based classroom setting such as sharing, interacting with peers, turn-taking, and friendship skills. Researcher Allee-Herndon (2021) states," Quality preschools include purposeful play can contribute dramatically to improved language, literacy, and mathematics competencies as well as improved responses to learning in kindergarten." The school improvement plan will benefit students at the Muskie Early Learning Center to gain access to a developmentally appropriate curriculum at the preschool level which will lead to kindergarten readiness skills when these children are ready to go to kindergarten in the next few years.

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