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Play Having Its Place in Early Childhood Education

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Play Having Its Place in Early Childhood Education

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

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Abstract

This literature review and school improvement plan focuses on the power of play for early childhood learners. Play is an innate characteristic in humans and various species alike. Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting play for children, academic demands and pressures felt by teachers and administrators are causing play in early childhood settings to be eliminated or reduced. Teachers, along with administrators, play a key part in this. Early childhood research suggests that teachers’ beliefs indicate the likelihood of teachers’ intentions to develop a child-centered curriculum and pedagogy that meet children’s development and needs (Cheung et al., 2022). Ergo, this school improvement plan focuses on ways to help teachers build self-efficacy; in addition, it was determined that students at this school need more frequent recesses and free play time to stay focused and exhibit positive behavior. The school improvement plan outlines specific criteria and changes for teachers and students to help each student achieve his/her level of educational excellence.

Keywords: play, early childhood, development, teachers
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Play Having Its Place in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood learners make sense of the world through play. Children’s innate drive to play is seen as early as infancy and is the foundation for developing language skills, healthy brain development, creativity, and social skills. Lev Vygotsky, an influential developmental psychologist, argued that play contains all the developmental tendencies (cognitive, physical, social, and emotional), and thus reasoned that play activities are essential in the preschool years because they lead to development, giving rise to abstract thinking, self-awareness, and self-regulation (Heang et al., 2021). Another founding father of psychology, Jean Piaget, saw the child as the source of action, actively constructing knowledge through a process of meaning-making through connection with prior knowledge and the real world. He emphasized the importance of young children constructing knowledge through their own activities (Heang et al., 2021). These psychology pioneers have long given educators, parents, and the human race points to ponder regarding child development. Through studying their work, educators past and present can conclude that children need to explore their environment to ensure healthy development.

Play-based learning provides opportunities for children to develop a sense of the world around them. Studies have found that children who engage in pretend play have greater conversational success, emotional understanding, and increased performance in problem-solving and divergent thinking (Heang et al., 2021). In addition, the benefits of play expand to early literacy development and social emotional regulation. The role of play contributes to language skills that relate to linguistic comprehension and, secondarily, because it helps children develop the functional skills of working with print and texts (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Students who engage in play-based practices within their academic setting often display reduced behavior issues (Ali et al., 2018).
Despite the research that supports the value of play for young children, free play and guided play in classrooms are being minimized or reduced. This is largely due to pressures felt by teachers and administrators to achieve prescribed academic outcomes. The belief in and popularity of “push-down academics” is thought to have gained traction with the development and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act during the Bush Administration (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). Yet, American early childhood educators have mostly agreed that formal academic instruction should not form the core of early childhood education (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). Although some educators endorse play as a vehicle for learning, the problem is that many continue to utilize primarily direct instruction methods for teaching early academic skills (Pyle et al., 2018). This is implemented in contrast to the research, which supports that play-based learning positively impacts children cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically.

The purpose of this literature review is to analyze how play-based learning affects students’ overall development, learning, and well-being, particularly regarding students with adverse childhood experiences. Findings from this study will inform teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, and legislators on the value of play in an early childhood academic setting. Many of these individuals may incorrectly view play as frivolous and unnecessary. It is the author’s goal to equip readers with facts and quantitative research, to ultimately change their mind regarding the value of play for children.

Articles and books collected for this research were compiled from the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. Further articles were collected and cited, utilizing Google Scholar. A comprehensive list of twenty-seven sources was utilized for this endeavor, including research that supports both play-based learning and direct instruction.
The principal finding from this research is that play is valuable for students socially, emotionally, cognitively, physically, and academically (Heang et al., 2021). Simply put, young children learn most effectively through interacting with the world around them. Despite the overwhelming evidence that supports this, instruction in kindergarten settings is found primarily to include direct instruction, which is more of a passive learning approach. Due to academic demands and pressures placed on teachers and administrators, playtime for children is being minimized or reduced in schools. This is especially true in the United States.

This literature review is comprised of four sections. The first section dives into the research on how play enhances children’s social emotional skills, early literacy skills, and math skills. Secondly, I answer the question: Why is play being minimized or reduced in United States schools? The primary reason for this is academic pushdown and pressure on teachers and administrators for students to perform well on standardized tests. The third section answers the question: How does play impact children with adverse childhood experiences? Finally, the ending consists of practical applications of play-based learning in early childhood classrooms.
Review of the Literature

Friedrich Froebel, the German educator who was the founder of kindergarten, said, “A child is a seed or tender plant that needs the care and nurture of the gardener – the parent or teacher. The parent’s and teacher’s role is to observe, respect, and provide activities, mainly through play, for children to learn when they are ready” (Watini, 2020, p.1). Researcher Watini argues that the early childhood period is the most critical period in human life development (Watini, 2020). Therefore, important adults in children’s lives, such as teachers and parents, must be educated on how to best facilitate this active learning. Providing a play-rich environment is a beneficial means to achieve this.

This literature review focuses on the importance of play for early childhood learners. First, a vast array of research is presented regarding how play benefits children socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically. Next, the reader learns about how play is being minimized or reduced in school settings. This is partially due to teachers and administrators feeling pressure for students to perform well on standardized tests and to compete globally. The third section dives into how playtime positively impacts students with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Early intervention through play for children exposed to trauma and adversity can shift long-term health outcomes in a positive direction (Pliske et al., 2021). The finale gives practical ideas and suggestions on how to integrate play with academics, while also voicing challenges that educators face.

How Play Benefits Early Childhood Learners

Play has long been an innate characteristic of humans and animals alike. It is easily observable, and occurs in monkeys, humans, and even octopuses (Zosh et al., 2018). Play is considered a basic human right as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of
the Child and is an important aspect of every human being at any stage of life (Rachel et al., 2022). Play begins in infancy, and its benefits follow children all the way to adulthood (Heang et al., 2021). The average human with no background knowledge in education may see play as “nice, but not necessary”. Therefore, it’s the responsibility of educators, parents, and administrators to advocate for the need of play for children in all early educational settings. When children are playing, they are learning to be well-rounded individuals (Heang et al., 2021).

Researcher Zosh et al. (2018) note that defining play can be complex and has plagued researchers and philosophers for years. In their study, they define play as a spectrum, which ranges from free play to guided play. During free play, the child initiates and directs play; there is no pre-determined learning goal. Guided play, on the other hand, can take the form of an adult playing with a child and offering scaffolding, guidance, and support. Adult-child interactions during play activities can help children develop and practice abilities they have yet to master or develop (Heang et al., 2021). Both free play and guided play positively impact children’s well-being and development.

Joy and iteration are inherent in play. Joy, or positive affect, has been linked to increased executive functions and academic outcomes (Zosh et al., 2018). Executive functions are important because they enable children to regulate themselves behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. The impact of a five-week play-based intervention with preschoolers was investigated and found that the children who were in a fantastical pretend-play condition showed increased gains in executive function relative to children in a non-imaginative play condition (Zosh et al., 2018). This finding is mirrored in work done by Heang et al. (2021), in which studies found that children who engage in more pretend play have greater conversational success, emotional understanding, and increased performance on problem-solving and divergent thinking.
The importance of play was examined by Yogman et. al. (2018), and this work was published by The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). A key finding was that play is not frivolous; it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function, which allows humans to pursue goals and ignore distractions (Yogman et al., 2018). Yogman et. al go on to say that when play, along with safe, stable, nurturing relationships are missing in a child’s life, toxic stress can disrupt the development of executive function and the learning of prosocial behavior. Researchers believe in the benefits of play so much that they promoted writing a prescription for play at wellness visits. It is worth noting that many of the authors of this work are medical doctors and emphasize the importance of playful learning for promoting healthy child development. This suggests that play for children can be equally as important as other physical and mental health components, ranging from taking vitamins to getting enough exercise. The findings of Yogman et al. (2018) and Zosh et al. (2018) have a common element, in that play directly affects executive functioning for children.

Studies cited by Heang et al. (2021) found that play can positively impact children in the areas of literacy and math. Specifically, studies by Bergen and Mauer (2000), found that four-year-olds’ play (in the form of rhyming games, making shopping lists, and “reading” story books to stuffed toys) enhanced both language and reading readiness (including phonological awareness) after the children had entered kindergarten. In addition, play lays the foundation for logical mathematical thinking and stimulates “early math” in children’s everyday experiences (Heang et al., 2021). The mathematical knowledge gained through everyday play activities seems to occur as a natural component of cognitive development, often without any adult instruction (Heang et al., 2021).
A qualitative research study conducted by Heang et al. (2021) collected early childhood teachers’ interpretations of the benefits of play for learning. This data was collected through interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals. The teachers-participants generally believed that play contributed to learning and development (Heang et al., 2021). Teachers divulged that play impacted the following areas of development: cognitive, social, emotional, and physical. “Children learn skills to get along with others, develop attitudes, learn to collaborate, and resolve social conflicts that seem to surface during play” (Heang et al., 2021, p.67). “When playing with peers, children learn a system of social rules, including ways to control themselves and tolerate their frustrations in a social setting” (Heang et al., 2021, p.67).

**Threats of Play Being Taken Away**

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of play and its innateness across species, play is being seen as an optional luxury, rather than a necessity, in schools across the nation. This is largely due to pressures felt by administrators and teachers for students to perform well on standardized tests. The belief in and popularity of “push-down academics” is thought to have gained traction with the development and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act during the Bush Administration (Harmon et al., 2018). Many researchers and practitioners argue that the pressure on teachers to have their students perform well on tests has inadvertently created an “accountability shovedown”. This is an attempt by educators and administrators to build stronger academic skills at a younger age so that when the students are old enough to be tested, they are more likely to perform well on the tests (Harmon et al., 2018). Consequently, early childhood teachers have come to spend less time creating opportunities for social engagement and more time on reading and writing initiatives that children may be tested on as they progress to 3rd grade (Harmon et al., 2018).
Sadly and alarmingly, standardization can also lead teachers to put pressure on young children to reach goals they may not be developmentally prepared for (Harmon et al., 2018). After all, there is research to support that children develop at different levels and different paces. The increased focus on standards and readiness could discourage teachers from focusing on educating the whole child and limits them to focusing strictly on achieving academic competencies (Harmon et al., 2018). The result of focusing primarily on preparing children for standardized tests can reap negative consequences for children’s literacy development (Harmon et al., 2018). When teachers become fixated on meeting set objectives and benchmarks at an early age, they risk valuing performance over learning. As a result, children may be more focused on memorization and meeting pre-determined goals rather than engaging in the experience of learning (Harmon et al., 2018).

While play for children has research to back its success, arguments have been brought forth that assert how direct instruction is extremely effective in student learning. This is a counterargument that suggests minimizing play-based learning in early childhood classrooms would not be detrimental to children. Researcher Stockard et al. (2018) dove into the effectiveness of direct instruction by analyzing 328 studies and examining literature published from 1966 through 2016. The formal beginning of direct instruction was a preschool program for children from very impoverished backgrounds at the University of Illinois in the mid-1960s (Stockard et al., 2018). Despite direct instruction originating in an early childhood setting, there was very little information brought forth in the study on the effectiveness of direct instruction for preschool and kindergarten learners. However, the analysis of the literature and studies were consistently positive; most estimates would be considered medium to large using the criteria generally used in the psychological literature and substantially larger than the criterion of .25
typically used in education research (Stockard et al., 2018). The authors state that despite the very large body of research supporting its effectiveness, direct instruction has not been widely embraced or implemented. This may be due to teachers, administrators, and instructional coaches viewing this form of teaching as passive learning for students. This contrasts play-based learning, in which students are thinking creatively and problem solving.

Research brought forth by Pistorova et al. (2020) contradicts beliefs in the effectiveness of direct instruction. These findings indicate that education needs to respond to the changing world and prepare students for the twenty-first century. The authors argue that responding to our ever-changing world cannot be addressed through traditional practices that silo content and ask students to passively absorb standardized knowledge (Pistorova et al., 2020). Pistorova et al. (2020) talk about the ‘Four Cs’ that are considered the most relevant and crucial to the twenty-first century K-12 learner: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. They argue that inquiry-based learning is necessary to achieve these four components and children, being innately curious, achieve these elements through play. “The growing call for inquiry highlights an accumulative crisis within the educational system of the United States where inquiry-based, student-centered approaches are displaced by standardized curricula focused on the teaching of academic skills through direct instruction” (Pistorova et al., 2020, p.2). A key point in this research indicates that increasing pressure on teachers results in pedagogical approaches that have little to do with what research tells us is developmentally appropriate for young children. The result is a crisis in early childhood education in the United States that removes play and inquiry, the means through which young children make sense of their world (Pistorova et al., 2020).

**The Impact of Play on Children with Adverse Childhood Experiences**
Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is a term used to describe types of abuse, neglect, and other traumatic childhood experiences that impact later health and well-being (Sciaraffa et al., 2018). Nearly half of all children nationally and in most states have experienced at least one ACE (Murphey et al., 2019). A study conducted by Pliske et al. (2021) explored how experiences with play and expressive and creative arts served as a protective factor for adults who were exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The participants in the study were aged 25 and older and reported four or more ACEs on a modified ACE inventory. Participants noted that play and the arts provided a context for identity formation and integration of emotional and cognitive processing concerning early trauma (Pliske et al., 2021). “Expressive arts, drama, dance, music making, and other forms of play can offer a beacon of hope – and even a lifetime – in the turbulence of life’s storms” (Pliske et al., 2021, p.244). Not only is play therapeutic, but it also enables children to communicate childhood trauma to therapists productively, to seek help. Pliske et al. (2021) note that traditional therapy methods are likely to fail children exposed to complex trauma because they have an impeded ability to focus on the words of heavy language-based approaches consistent with conventional psychotherapies. Researchers have found that young trauma survivors with limited language capabilities benefit from expressive arts interventions, because they offer a means of communicating without words (Pliske et al., 2021).

Lin et al. (2015) explored the overall effectiveness of child-centered play therapy (CCPT) and the results are parallel to that of Pliske et al. (2021). The authors partook in a meta-analytic review of 52 controlled outcome studies between 1995 and 2010 regarding CCPT. The results indicated a moderate treatment effect; specifically, the overall treatment effect size was .47. On average, children receiving CCPT interventions performed approximately half of one
standard deviation better on given outcome measures than children who received no treatment or received an alternative intervention (Lin et al., 2015). The results of this meta-analysis indicate that incorporating play into treatment for children with traumatic pasts can be life-changing. This is a significant finding, considering the number of young children in the United States with significant emotional and behavioral concerns is increasing at an alarming rate (Lin et al., 2015).

Early childhood educators are in a position to recognize and buffer the impact of ACEs. This can be done by recognizing the child’s capabilities, providing a sense of belonging, and fostering a caring, protective classroom community (Sciaraffa et al., 2018). “For young children who have experienced trauma, the classroom can be a welcome relief and in fact can be protective when other aspects of their lives are stressed” (Sciaraffa et al., 2018, p.350). According to these findings, enabling children to practice problem-solving, develop social skills, partake in collaboration and turn-taking, and be aware of other’s feelings can be achieved through developmentally appropriate playtime in classrooms.

As a result of this research, it is conclusive to say that the consequences of removing playtime for children, especially for those at-risk, can be detrimental. Though, because of ethical implications, research assessing the impact of play deprivation in humans is sparse. There are, however, studies that have been reviewed by Vanderschuren et al. (2014), which show consequences of play deprivation in animals. Rodent studies show that the absence of play impairs the development of young mammals (Nijhof et al., 2018). Rats that were isolated during the developmental phase in which they display most play behavior, essentially depriving them of social play, developed cognitive deficits such as rigidity and impairments in impulse control and decision-making. The socially deprived rats exhibited reduced social affiliative behavior with other rats in adulthood. These findings align with the observations of impaired social behavior in
monkeys that were raised in isolation and deprived of play (Nijhof et al., 2018). Humans can learn from these harsh experiments and utilize them to emphasize the vitalness of play for early childhood learners. One can surmise that if animals are affected by lack of play into adulthood, the same could be true for children.

**Practical Ways to Integrate Play with Academics**

Despite the data being in large support of play-based learning, it may not be as simple to integrate as one may think. Although some educators endorse play as a vehicle for learning, many continue to utilize primarily direct instruction methods for teaching early academic skills, with varying possible reasons for this discrepancy suggested by researchers (Pyle et al., 2018). Pyle et al. (2018) sought to identify the challenges that teachers face with integrating play and literacy learning. This study involved 12 participating classrooms; data was gathered mostly via semi-structured teacher interviews and videos. Results revealed three common challenges with integrating play and literacy: direct instruction plays a key instructional role, play is less structured and difficult to plan, and feeling uncertain about how to implement guided play (Pyle et al., 2018). Teachers in this study communicated the challenges of implementing play-based learning, one of which being that they feel ill-equipped to integrate it, due to lack of training. Other concerns were: pressure to ensure children attain high academic standards, large teacher-child ratios, and a lack of time and space to support play (Pyle et al., 2018).

Indeed, teacher beliefs are considered important for motivating teachers’ intentions to implement developmentally appropriate practices. Early childhood research suggests that teachers’ beliefs associated with perceived efficacy indicate the likelihood of teachers’ intentions to develop a child-centered curriculum and pedagogy that meet children’s development and needs (Cheung et al., 2022). Potential reasons for tensions and discrepancies are grounded in the
differing beliefs of teachers’ perceptions on the role of play in children’s learning (Cheung et al., 2022). In other words, if teachers don’t “see the point” in play-based learning or feel ill-equipped to implement it in their classrooms, it’s unlikely to happen. Teacher beliefs and perceptions carry a very large weight in determining what kind of learning environment children will experience.

Addressing the perceived hurdle for teachers of time constraints and the pressure to teach a curriculum that is a mile wide and an inch deep, Pyle et al. (2018) suggest that a practical solution may be for teachers to focus on implementing guided play in their classrooms. While free play is emphasized as a primarily child-directed endeavor, guided play emphasizes the importance of active educator involvement in order to embed or extend academic content within children’s play activities. Guided play can be an effective strategy for fostering literacy in young children (Pyle et al., 2018). In addition, students who engage in play-based practices within their academic setting often display reduced behavior issues (Ali et al., 2018). This research suggests that incorporating play into classrooms can help maximize learning time while making children feel emotionally safe.

A collection of studies synthesized by Rand et al. (2021) suggests that integrating play with literacy may not be as much of a mountain to climb as Pyle et al. (2018) suggests. Rand et al. (2021) recognize that oral language development influences reading comprehension, and that play enhances this important skill. Sociodramatic play includes self-directed, imaginative use of language, and is linked to literacy development (Rand et al., 2021). This play may involve, for example, children pretending to be customers at a restaurant and ordering food by reading a menu. While media publications citing the science of reading have called for more focus on direct instruction of skills in phonics and phonemic awareness, Rand et al. (2021) point to studies that use play to enhance vocabulary development, which is also a crucial pillar of reading.
Han, Moore, Vukelich, and Buelle (2010) tested two vocabulary-teaching interventions with at-risk preschool children that included: a) direct instruction or b) shortened direct instruction and an added 10-minute session of dramatic or constructive play with a pretend element. The children in the sessions with the added play condition showed more growth in both receptive language and picture-naming vocabulary measures (Rand et al., 2021). More recently, Hadley, Dickinson, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2019) implemented a two-month vocabulary intervention in which preschool children engaged in a highly scaffolded interactive reading of an informational book with explanations of vocabulary words. This was followed by a 10-minute play intervention. An adult guided the first two sessions, and the next two sessions included child-directed play. The children who engaged in play showed substantial growth on a demanding measure of vocabulary depth that asked them to provide semantic and contextual information about the words (Rand et al., 2021). Both of these studies suggest that children’s oral language and vocabulary skills can be enhanced by incorporating as little as 10 minutes of play per day.

Researcher Campbell et al. (2018) stated that STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) practices in the early years are informed by play-based education pedagogies. Therefore, play-based learning lends itself to STEM learning in early childhood settings. This research team observed 4 preschool centers and found that STEM was presented in a wide range of forms. Indoor and outdoor settings were observed in this study. In the inside environments, children’s learning was developed through the way the setting was arranged, through specific activities presented by the educator, and through children’s free play (Campbell et al., 2018). In the outside environment, there were different opportunities for children to engage in STEM learning through play. With loose parts, children constructed bridges, roads, and rivers. Sandpits,
for example, offered opportunities for STEM play, as it is a versatile material that can be re-fashioned to represent what the child desires (Campbell et al., 2018). Children, when engaged in play, often tackled mini-learning projects that involved integration of several STEM areas (Campbell et al., 2018). According to these findings, play can be implemented in early childhood classrooms by incorporating STEM components.

For teachers wanting to minimize direct instruction for students, and instead make learning more meaningful, project-based learning (PBL) is an option that is gaining traction in the world of education. Through academically rigorous projects, students acquire deep content knowledge while also mastering 21st-century skills: knowing how to think critically, analyze information for reliability, collaborate with diverse colleagues, ask good questions, and solve problems creatively (Boss et al., 2018). Project-based learning emphasizes enhancing class culture to achieve academic success. Some suggestions for teachers to try are morning meetings, thinking routines (i.e. think, pair, share), fishbowl discussions, reflections, and celebrations (Boss et al., 2018). Project-based learning would look very different at the early childhood level, however, than at the high school level. In a PBL classroom, teachers present challenges or problems to students that they try to solve in groups. In a kindergarten classroom, for instance, an example of this could be creating a home for a class gerbil. Nilsson et al. (2018) argue for a reconceptualization of early childhood education that understands learning and development not as an outcome, primarily, of instruction and teaching, but as an outcome of play and exploration.

School Profile

Student Performance
In northeast Iowa, the rural school district of Edgewood-Colesburg serves students from the communities of Edgewood and Colesburg. In the 2022-2023 school year, there were 273 students enrolled from kindergarten to sixth grade. Of these students, 96% are white, 2.6% are Hispanic, 1.1% are multi-racial, and .4% are African American. Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary earned an overall rating of “Acceptable” in the ESSA Performance Category. Specifically, 54.85 students out of 100 met learning goals, with the Iowa state average being 54.81. The overall performance includes scores for all Iowa schools across several performance measures. The proficiency percentage in mathematics was 75.69, which is well above the state average of 69.5. Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary was behind the state average of proficiency in language arts, however, with a score of 67.36; the state average is 71.4 (Iowa Department of Education, 2018).

Students in grades 3 through 12 completed the Conditions for Learning survey to assess safety, student engagement, and the overall learning environment in each building (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). This data provides important information about student perception and is used to determine the level of support needed by schools. There were 694 students from the elementary, junior high, and high school that completed this survey. Of these students, 53.66% were considered low socioeconomic status, compared to the state average of 46.06%. The percentage of students who perceive a safe learning environment at school was 54.41%, compared to the state average of 49.4%.

**Student and Community Characteristics**

The elementary school is located in Colesburg, Iowa, which had a population of 386 people, according to the 2020 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Of this population, 95.34% were white, .26% was African American, .52% was Asian, and .52% was some other race. The
The junior high and high school of the Edgewood-Colesburg district is located in Edgewood, Iowa. This had a population of 909 people in the 2020 census; of these people, 96.26% were white, .22% was African American, .33% was Asian, and .44% was some other race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Edgewood supports 85 businesses and is split between the counties of Clayton and Delaware; Clayton County has an unemployment rate of 4.2% and Delaware County has an unemployment rate of 2.8% (Iowa Works, 2024). Of the 33 graduating seniors in 2023, 36% attended a four-year college, 27% attended a community college, and 33% entered the workforce.

**School Characteristics**

Edgewood-Colesburg is ranked a 1A school, and takes pride in being a small, rural, tight-knit community. Recently, a $12,000,000 school bond passed to provide funds to remodel, repair, improve, and equip the elementary school facility, including HVAC improvements; additions to the junior and senior high included a new gym, a new space for career and technical education, safety and security upgrades, and site improvements, including relocation of the main entrance and drop-off and pick-up areas. Edgewood-Colesburg is a split district; professional goals and learning opportunities differ for teachers in each building, and professional development sessions are rarely held together. There is a mentor program available for new teachers, which spans two years. Representatives from the Area Education Agency (AEA) and building administrators assist in this learning.

**Parent Involvement**

In the Edgewood-Colesburg Community School District, parents are encouraged to attend parent-teacher conferences twice a year. At these conferences, parents are informed about academic growth, social emotional well-being, student behavior, and future goals for the child.
Of the 16 elementary teachers interviewed in Colesburg, Iowa, 100% said they welcome parent visitors in some capacity during the school year; however, only 25% have regular parent volunteers. At the elementary school, one way parents are consistently involved in the lower grades (K-3) is through holiday classroom parties, in which family members are invited to attend. Involvement in the upper grades (4-6) is primarily through parents coming to watch reader’s theater performances and examining projects children have been working on. Teachers voiced that they keep in communication with parents through class newsletters, email, phone calls, and the app Seesaw. At the junior high and high school, parents stay informed of student progress through accessibility to JMC, a student record management system.

School District Mission and Values

The mission statement of the Edgewood-Colesburg district is for each student to achieve his or her level of educational excellence. The elementary teachers wrote their own mission statement for staff members in the fall of 2023: As the Ed-Co Elementary staff family, we value mutual respect by communicating effectively, accepting differences, and supporting one another and our students. As a staff community, we will treat each other professionally: with kindness, empathy, and support. The elementary school is involved in the Leader In Me program, which is based off Sean Covey’s 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. All teachers, except those who have joined the elementary in the 2023-2024 school year, have attended a Leader In Me training to learn how to teach these habits and leadership skills to students. There is school-wide “lead time” carved into the schedule of every teacher; this takes place three times a week for fifteen minutes each. Classroom teachers have a lead time partner, which is either a non-classroom teacher or an associate. Assemblies are held once monthly to reinforce the habit the building is currently focusing on, as well as implementing a new school-wide “wildly important goal” (WIG).
Current Student Learning Goals

The elementary has three school-wide building goals: 1) By spring 2024, teachers will increase effectiveness of data-based decisions using formative assessments aligned to proficiency scales to increase the percentage of students passing summative assessments to 80%. 2) By spring 2024, students will demonstrate their critical thinking through written responses and discussions in small and whole group settings, as measured through student work samples shared during collaborative structures (PLCs, learning labs, grade level meetings, and faculty meeting discussions) and 3) By spring 2024, students will develop and use self-awareness and self-management skills as measured by a decrease in the number of discipline referrals and an increase in Viking pride (VP) cards. Professional development sessions for teachers are continually focused on these three goals.

Teacher Learning and Collaboration

Specifically, critical thinking and collaboration are a large focus of professional learning for teachers. Teachers participate in professional learning communities (PLCs) once a week for 30 minutes. Of these four sessions that take place each month, one focuses on analyzing FAST progress monitoring data. Classroom teachers, special education teachers, the principal, the instructional coach, and the Title 1 reading teachers talk about each at-risk student to monitor whether they have made adequate growth. If students have not made adequate growth, they may be moved to a new intervention group, or the focus skill area may change, according to student need. The second the third sessions of the month are centered around proficiency scales and standards. Teachers choose a standard to discuss that they have recently taught and bring a written response from student(s) to serve as evidence of student learning. The teacher describes the class lesson or activity used prior to giving a formative assessment. The written response is
discussed among the team, in addition to the formative assessment, and the next steps are discussed. The last discussion topic is how collaboration and critical thinking were brought forth in the lesson. The minutes of this conversation among grade level teams is recorded in a Google document. The fourth PLC session is centered around social emotional learning (SEL). Challenging behaviors that students are exhibiting are discussed, and the group brainstorms ideas on how to help students and teachers. The principal, instructional coach, guidance counselor, grade level teachers, and the SEL Area Education Agency (AEA) representative are present during this meeting.

Learning labs are another teacher collaboration piece that is a focus for professional development. Teachers record themselves teaching a lesson; the recording is then watched by a mixed group of teachers, ranging from kindergarten to sixth grade. To avoid harsh criticism, teachers are instructed to steer away from giving advice; rather, they objectively tell the teacher what they saw, heard, or noticed. Learning labs take place at Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary twice yearly. Every teacher in the building is responsible for recording a lesson of his/her teaching once during the school year. The mission of the learning labs is to enable teachers to stay abreast of what is taking place in classrooms across the school. An overarching goal is for teachers to gain collaboration and critical thinking strategies.

**Needs Assessment**

At Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary School, it’s a priority for students and teachers to feel safe, valued, and cared for. Through data collection of a Google survey given to staff members, it was determined that many teachers feel stressed and disconnected from other professionals in the building. Teachers want to be treated as professionals who are trusted to make appropriate decisions for the well-being of their students. Due to academic pressures and demands placed on teachers, they are scrutinized and held to a higher standard than ever before.
This stress can take a toll on teachers’ overall mental state. “When teachers are tightly constrained as to how and what to educate, we signal students, parents, and society at large that teachers are not to be trusted or respected and that technical/managerial control is what is needed to fix problems” (Harmon et al., 2018, p.5). As a result, this school improvement plan focuses on building school climate and culture for teachers. This will hopefully eliminate stress and demands placed on them, which will, in turn, benefit students in the building.

One of the building goals for Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary is that students, by spring 2024, will develop and use self-awareness and self-management skills as measured by a decrease in the number of discipline referrals (ODRs) and an increase in Viking Pride (VP) cards. Previous data has shown that office referrals continue to climb as the school year progresses. This indicates that students may be dealing with more home stressors and need more guidance and support during this time. Sadly, the number of young children in the United States with significant emotional and behavioral concerns is increasing at an alarming rate. According to Mental Health America, approximately 20% of children develop mental health problems severe enough to meet diagnostic criteria, but less than one-third of them receive help (Lin et al., 2015). As a result, school staff members are becoming more and more responsible for ensuring students receive the help they need.

While teachers and administrators greatly care about students, it’s unclear to many why students exhibit the behaviors they do. Certainly, an overall goal is for students to achieve positive behavior at school; this school improvement plan focuses on lessening student stress and putting more supports in place to help them achieve this. Students in grades 1-6 are only given one recess during the school day. In addition, very little free play is allowed or allocated within their daily schedules. This lack of freedom and time to take breaks could be contributing to the
undesirable behaviors being shown at school. Allowing students more play time and breaks will be a priority of this plan; it is the hope that focusing on school climate and culture for students will help them be more focused and happy at school.

Data Analysis

Data was collected via a Google survey, and was administered to twenty-one teachers in the Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary School for the 2023-2024 school year. The questions were used to gain insight on teacher stress level, personal well-being, and perceived support given by administration and the building leadership team. Teachers reported their stress level on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Survey of Job-related Stress Level of Ed-Co teachers

According to these results, 43% of teachers feel stressed at a level of 80% or higher. On the contrary, only 28.5% feel stress at a level of 40% or less. Some teachers remain neutral with this question, at a percentage of 28.6%. This data proves that nearly half of the teachers in the building are experiencing high stress levels, which indicates a need to examine ways to support
teachers through challenges they encounter with their job. Teachers were also asked how they feel in regards to their overall well-being at the present time (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Survey of Overall Wellness of 2023-2024 Ed-Co Teachers*

Contrary to Figure 1, almost half of teachers (47.6%) indicate they are feeling mostly well with their own personal well-being. While nearly half of teachers are feeling personally well, a similar percentage (43%) indicate feeling high levels of stress at work. The juxtaposition of teachers feeling happy and well in their personal lives, while stressed in their jobs, is reason for concern and further investigation. This indicates that further actions should be taken to increase teacher morale and improve building culture. Teachers were also surveyed, asking how supported they felt by administration and the building leadership team (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**
A high percentage of teachers, 95.2%, vouched for feeling supported, in some capacity, by administration and the building leadership team. This strength of the Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary School is worth noting and shows that camaraderie and culture between teachers and administration is mostly satisfactory. However, 47.6% of teachers felt “sometimes supported”, rather than “mostly supported”. This shows there is room for improvement, and begs the question: What areas need further support?

The last question of the Google survey touched on this very point and asked teachers what further support they needed. Answers varied greatly, but some of the responses included applicable professional development, trust from administration, support from families and the school board, and more time to effectively complete work. Time and trust were two points that came up multiple times with this question. The data received from this question, in particular, indicates that teachers want to be treated as professionals and be granted work time to effectively prepare instruction and complete work to benefit students.

Data was collected to gauge overall happiness and wellness for students, as measured by the number of office referrals (ODRs) made for the 2022-2023 school year. Office referrals can
be made if students are exhibiting the following behaviors: abusive/inappropriate language, harassment, communication of a threat, defiance, disrespect, disruption, physical aggression, property damage, theft, and/or technology violation. Teachers and/or support staff fill out a recording sheet giving details of the student’s behavior and discuss the incident with the involved student(s). This paperwork goes to the principal, who pulls students aside within 24 hours and determines the consequence (in-school suspension, loss of privileges, etc.). Communication is made to parents via phone call or email, depending on the severity of the situation. Office referrals are totaled monthly for the building, and are broken down by quantity per grade level (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Number of Office Referrals for 2022-2023 School Year*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total by Grade:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K = 0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>3 = 2</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 = 3</td>
<td>6 = 1</td>
<td>6 = 1</td>
<td>6 = 0</td>
<td>6 = 3</td>
<td>6 = 3</td>
<td>6 = 3</td>
<td>6 = 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These numbers were compared to the number of Viking Pride (VP) cards handed out to students to see if there was a correlation between positive reinforcement from teachers and
student behavior exhibited. Students can earn VP cards for a variety of reasons, including a positive attitude, proactive behavior, and kindness shown to peers. After students receive a VP card, this is put into a collection bag. At the end of every week, the guidance counselor and instructional coach tally how many VP cards each child received per month. If students achieve a milestone number of VP cards, their name is posted on a display wall in the school. Milestone numbers include: 25, 50, 75, and 100. Table 2 below indicates how many VP cards students earned, building-wide, for the months of September 2022 through April 2023.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Viking Pride (VP) cards</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1628</td>
<td>2576</td>
<td>1847</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>1069</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>1361</td>
<td>1009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

October was the month that the most VP cards were handed out to students. However, it was the fifth highest month for ODRs, out of a possible 8 months. The month with the least amount of ODRs was December, which doesn’t correlate with the number of VP cards handed out. December was the third lowest, out of 8 possible months, for the number of VP cards earned by students. This shows there is not a strong connection between student behavior and positive reinforcement shown from teachers, in the form of dispersing VP cards. Therefore, teachers and administrators may need to pursue other avenues to help students work through stressors that are resulting in office referrals.

Students in grades 3-6 were given a Leader In Me survey in spring 2022 and winter 2022 to gauge overall happiness and wellness, both at school and at home. This survey is examined by
the building leadership team and is shown to all teachers. This indicates what further measures need to be taken to improve student culture. Students were asked a variety of questions, including how they feel about themselves, how they interact with peers, and what their relationship is like with teachers (see Table 3 below). The percentage points below indicate how many students responded “yes” to the following questions. Data was compared from spring 2022 to winter 2022. Percentages highlighted in yellow show more than a 5 point decrease since the last time students were surveyed, whereas percentages highlighted in green show more than a 5 point increase since the last time students were surveyed.

Table 3

Leader in Me Survey for Students in Grades 3-6 for Spring 2022 and Winter 2022

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3rd-6th grade</th>
<th>Spring 2022</th>
<th>Winter 2022</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like myself.</td>
<td>95.1%</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encourage others to do their best.</td>
<td>98.4%</td>
<td>92.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If something is hard to do, I give up.</td>
<td>95.9%</td>
<td>91.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I argue with a friend, I find a solution that makes both of us feel good.</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
<td>86.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I am in a bad mood, there is nothing I can do about it.</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
<td>74.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I work towards my goals at school.</td>
<td>95.9%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am excited about the work I do in school.</td>
<td>75.6%</td>
<td>80.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to learn as much as I can in class.</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>97.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am happy to be at school.</td>
<td>83.6%</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am an important part of my school.</td>
<td>86.2%</td>
<td>83.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People at school care about me.</td>
<td>92.7%</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Every question on the winter 2022 screener showed a results percentage of 80% or higher. In spring 2022, 100% of students answered “yes” to the statement: I try to learn as much as I can in class. This shows that students are motivated to be in school and enjoy learning. While 100% of students want to learn, an interesting contrast is that only 80.3% want to challenge themselves. Students may need guidance and support from teachers to find grit in day-to-day learning. Many children have strong teacher-student relationships, which is proven by the last question shown in Table 3. Specifically, 99.1% of students felt they could rely on teachers to help them when they are stuck on schoolwork. This shows that teachers have built a relationship with nearly all students, and students feel valued and supported.

The winter 2022 questionnaire is an overall improvement from the spring 2022 questionnaire, which had three questions fall below 80% of student responses. There were four areas from spring 2022 to winter 2022 that showed more than a 5-point decrease. However, there were also 3 areas from this same timeframe that indicated a 5-point increase. While there is always room for improvement, this survey indicates that most students in grades 3-6 feel happy at school (83.5%), and can rely on peers and teachers to help them solve problems (see Table 3 above).
If students are mostly happy at school and believe people care about them, what is the reason for the increase in office referrals as the year progresses? More information may be needed, in the form of an additional Leader in Me survey, given at the end of the school year. Unfortunately, this data was not collected in spring 2023. However, teachers dug into the data shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3 during a professional development session. One observation is that ODRs are very high for the month of October. This is usually when teachers and students have school rules established and are diving deep into content areas. Teachers wondered if the higher expectations of sitting and staying engaged could be a reason for more behaviors. Another wondering was: Are students playing outside less in October? If sitting more and playing less are the culprit for more behaviors and office referrals, this could be an area needing change for a school improvement plan.

One possible reason for unfavorable student behaviors could be the lack of free time for students to play within the school day. Preschool and kindergarten are the only two grades, out of eight, that have more than one recess. Grades 1-6 are given only one recess, and therefore, only one break throughout the school day. Is this enough for students, or does this cause them to act out and become agitated? Students in these same grades are only granted free play, mostly in the form of STEM bins, right away in the morning before the school bell rings. For students that eat breakfast at school, they are given zero minutes of free play throughout the school day. Preschool and kindergarten teachers allow more free play time for students. Kindergarten students participate in 30 minutes of center time at the end of the school day, and preschool has a play-integrated curriculum. Out of 11 early childhood teachers surveyed at Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary, only 27% indicated having a solid understanding of what play-based learning is. In addition, 82% admitted to feeling pressure for students to perform well on academic
assessments. It’s possible that a lack of understanding of the benefits of play-based learning, coupled with pressure for students to perform well, could be contributing to play time and free time falling to the wayside. This is a shame, considering the benefits of play for children are benefits that will follow them into adulthood (Heang et al., 2021). Lev Vygotsky, a founding father of psychology, argues that play contains all the developmental tendencies (cognitive, physical, social and emotional) and thus creates a zone of proximal development that pulls the child forward (Heang et al., 2021).

**Action Plan**

After reviewing school data and relevant literature, multiple themes were identified in support of this plan for improved morale of teachers and students at Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary. Teachers’ morale is an assisting factor to enhance students’ positive behaviors as well as their learning. If teachers have higher morale, they form a better learning environment to promote student success (Lüleci et al., 2018). Themes that emerged for teachers were: high stress levels, lack of applicable professional development and work time, and the desire for trust and to be treated like professionals. It’s also apparent that teachers need different tools to propel themselves forward, so differentiation will be crucial for this improvement plan. For students, a key theme that emerged was lack of breaks in the form of recess and free play; it can be argued that student behaviors are on the rise, due to this.

Accountability pressures hurt teacher morale and increase the risk of turnover by undermining the professional culture of the school and by diminishing teacher cooperation and trust (Erichsen et al., 2020). Principals and administrators are needed to lead educational improvement, foster effective change efforts, lead the implementation of new standards, and are central to shaping strong, professional school cultures (Ohlson et al., 2016). Academic demands
placed on teachers are higher now than ever before, due to changes in legislation and pressures felt for students to perform well on standardized tests. Abundant international research has shown that retaining teachers is challenging. Teacher attrition negatively impacts student achievement; a continuously changing teaching force is harmful for both students and teachers (Amitai et al., 2022).

On the Google survey given to 2023-2024 Edgewood-Colesburg teachers (see Figures 1, 2, and 3), 10 out of 21 teachers expressed needing more time to prep and plan for quality lessons and a desire for less pushdown on academic initiatives. In an effort to retain teachers and improve teacher morale, several action steps will be taken. Restructuring professional development opportunities to benefit teacher needs will be a large part of the changes put into place. In addition, teachers will be given more one-on-one support from administration and a pre-determined teacher colleague.

**Action Step #1 for Teachers: Change Structure of Learning Labs**

Learning labs take place at the school twice yearly. This entails teachers recording themselves teaching a lesson; this is then watched among a mixed group of teachers, ranging from kindergarten to sixth grade. Teachers are instructed to steer away from giving advice; rather, they objectively tell the teacher what they saw, heard, or noticed. Every teacher in the building is responsible for recording a lesson of his/her teaching once during the school year. Teachers in the building have expressed a great amount of stress having to host a learning lab and share their recorded lesson. One change that will take place for this action plan is to alter the way learning labs are approached. Rather than teachers being vulnerable to a small panel of professionals, they will be partnered with a teacher in the building of a different grade level. Teachers will collaborate with this colleague throughout the school year. Rather than being
recorded, teachers will visit their partner teaching a lesson in person for a short amount of time (15 minutes or less). Teachers will collaborate afterwards and share similar statements as before (I saw, I heard, and/or I noticed). The smaller audience, coupled with a more personal approach, should alleviate previous stress felt from learning labs, while also allowing teachers to learn and grow from colleagues.

**Action Step #2 for Teachers: Wellness Check-Ins**

Teachers expressed various needs from administration and the building leadership team on the 2023-2024 Google Survey. To help teachers receive differentiated help, the principal will meet with each teacher in person one-on-one twice yearly. The questions that teachers will be asked are shown in Figure 4 below. The goal of this check-in is for teachers to feel appreciated, heard, and valued. The principal can use this feedback to help teachers receive the help they need.

**Figure 4**

*Principal-Teacher Check-In Tool*
Action Step #3 for Teachers: Differentiated Professional Development

Using the information gained in Figure 4, the principal can determine what areas of professional development would be most beneficial. Currently, professional development is
carried out in a “one size fits all” approach. Making a change to differentiated stations ensures that teachers are receiving the help they need. In addition, this boosts morale, because teachers will feel that professional learning is worth their time, energy, and attention. Table 4 below details a sample all-day professional development schedule with differentiation. The provided stations are ones that teachers expressed wanting more help with on the 2023-2024 Google survey.

**Table 4**

_Sample All-Day Professional Development Schedule_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Allocated: All day</th>
<th>Professional Development Agenda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7:50-8:20</td>
<td>Welcome back breakfast provided by the building leadership team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:20-8:30</td>
<td>Explanation of the differentiated stations listed below and how the morning professional development (PD) will progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30-11:00</td>
<td>Differentiated stations will begin, with 6 options available. Each station will last for 40 minutes, with a 10 minute break before the next one begins. Teachers will choose 3 stations to attend out of the following options:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Station #1</strong></td>
<td>8:40-9:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Station #2</strong></td>
<td>9:30-10:10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Station #3
10:20-11:00

Options available:

- **Social Emotional Learning (SEL) – Zones of Regulation** with AEA staff Jill. *Location: Lunchroom. Explanation: Learn how to teach students to regulate their feelings and sensory needs. The teacher will learn about the 4 colored zones and how this can be applied in the classroom. In addition, learn how to help students with behavior issues de-escalate to be successful. Grade Levels: All*

- **Science of Reading** with Title 1 teacher Shelley. *Location: Shelley’s classroom. Explanation: Do you get frustrated trying to help your struggling readers, but are seeing little progress with the strategies you’ve tried? Learn about the strategy of syllable division for students to help them take on multi-syllabic words. Grade Levels: 3-6*

- **Mindfulness Strategies for Students/Yoga** with art teacher Karen. *Location: Art room. Explanation: Learn about various mudras to incorporate into your classroom with our yoga-certified teacher. All teachers will receive three mudra cards, with instructions/reminders on the back to prompt students to choose a mudra based on how they are feeling that day. Learn to help your students with creativity, self-expression, and de-escalation. Grade Levels: All.*
11:00-12:00  Lunch. Teachers will bring a dish to share and boost camaraderie between staff by dining together in the lunchroom.

12:00-3:45  Work time in classrooms; prepare for the upcoming week and semester.
Initiatives for teacher wellness strategies will be incorporated into at least two early dismissal PD days, which allows for 2 hours of professional learning. The goal of increased time spent on teacher wellness is to increase overall job satisfaction by cutting back on academic pressures and pushdown that were perceived problems on the 2023-2024 Google Survey. Efforts to increase overall job happiness and morale is not frivolous work. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction that teachers acquire from their institutions has an importance because of its influence on teaching quality (Lüleci et al., 2018). See Table 5 below for a sample of incorporating wellness into professional development time.

Table 5

Sample Early Dismissal Professional Development Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Allotted: 2 hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30-1:50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:50-2:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:15-2:30</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30-2:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:45-3:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:10-3:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:30-3:45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Action Step #1 for Students**

Currently, Edgewood-Colesburg (Ed-Co) students in grades 1-6 are given one recess, for a total of 30 minutes of break time for the entire school day. This is not enough time, and the lack of breaks could be causing student behaviors to escalate. Students need more frequent, shorter breaks, rather than one large break. Table 6 below shows modifications made to Ed-Co’s 2nd grade schedule. Two major changes made were adding one recess to the school day and allowing for free play time in the classroom. While the included sample is for 2nd grade, this
school improvement plan will add an extra recess and at least 15 minutes of free play time for every grade.

**Table 6**

*Sample of Modified 2nd Grade Schedule*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Daily Schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:15</td>
<td>Arrival/Morning work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:15-8:35</td>
<td>Lead Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:35-9:05</td>
<td>Phonics/Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:05-9:20</td>
<td>Free play in classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:20-9:40</td>
<td>WIN time (interventions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:40-10:05</td>
<td>Morning recess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:05-10:25</td>
<td>Whole group math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:25-11:25</td>
<td>Math rotations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-12:05</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:05-12:25</td>
<td>Afternoon recess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:25-1:20</td>
<td>Guided Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:20-2:20</td>
<td>Specials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:20-2:30</td>
<td>Milk Break/Read Aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30-3:05</td>
<td>Science/Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:05-3:15</td>
<td>Pack Up/Dismissal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Action Plan Summary**
This action plan involves changes for both teachers and students. The bulk of this proposal is focused on benefiting teachers, as there is much evidence to support that teachers have a large influence on student success. Teachers are the most important component that influences the achievement of teaching-learning activities. Teachers are the architectures of student behavior (Lüleci et al., 2018). It is believed that increases in undesirable student behavior may be linked to lack of appropriate breaks throughout the day. Allowing students time to decompress and recharge, in the form of more than one recess allotted and free play time, is also a focus of this plan.

**Implementation of the Plan**

**Staff Responsibilities**

**Administrators**

Administrators, including the elementary principal and superintendent, will review the proposed school improvement plan in May 2024, for integration beginning in the 2024-2025 school year. The building principal will play a large role in every component of this plan; specifically, she will assign teachers in the building their year-long partner for the structure change in learning labs and will create that schedule. The principal will be responsible for conducting wellness check-ins with teachers, as well as organizing the scheduling needed for this. The information gained from these meetings will be analyzed by the principal to determine what is going well and what areas need to be refined.

**Instructional Coach**

The instructional coach will act as a liaison between the building principal and teachers; that is, she will help keep lines of communication open among the principal, teachers, and
support staff. She will also work with teachers on specific areas they would like to improve in their teaching. The instructional coach will oversee assigning classroom coverage for teachers as they visit their assigned colleague twice yearly. The biggest role of the instructional coach is to act as a mentor to teachers as they navigate the proposed components of the plan, and be available to give strategies on how to improve.

**Building Leadership Team**

The building leadership team will be responsible for choosing the differentiated professional development sessions that are proposed in the third section of this plan. They will analyze surveys given to teachers to determine which areas teachers need the most assistance with. The building leadership team will also be in charge of morale boosters, such as providing staff breakfast for improving school culture. The building leadership team will collaborate with the AEA social worker to create charts, tables, and graphs as data gets collected from teachers and students. This data will be shared with the school board, teachers, and elementary support staff.

**Plan for Monitoring Interventions**

The success or failure of this plan will be monitored in various ways throughout the 2024-2025 school year. The following pieces of data will be collected: Leader in Me student surveys, Google Survey 2024-2025 for Teachers, and ODR totals for each month. This data will be analyzed by the building leadership team and staff members to determine if the plan is making an improvement with staff morale and student behavior. If there is not a substantial difference between the previous year and the year of implementation, further changes may need to be made. This information will be shared with the school board at the end of the 2024-2025 school year.
Timeline

To ensure success of this school improvement plan, a timeline was created to document when tasks and milestones will be achieved, starting from its integration. Administrators must approve the proposed action plan for teachers and students by the June 2024 school board meeting. This is necessary, in order for changes to take place starting in August of the 2024-2025 school year. The plan will first be brought forth to the building administrator, then presented for approval at the next school board meeting.

Timeline for Action Step #1 for Teachers: Change Structure of Learning Labs

Upon approval, veteran teachers will be paired with less experienced teachers in August 2024 by the building leadership team and administration; this pairing will be whom teachers rely on during learning labs and other events that will take place throughout the year. Learning labs will take place in October 2024 and February 2025. Teachers will arrange times to host a learning lab in their classroom, as well as observe their partner. They will coordinate these time slots during an August full-day professional development session. This schedule will be shared with the principal and instructional coach in September 2024, and these leaders will start assigning coverage for classroom teachers via a Google document. This document will be shared with teachers during a professional development session in September 2024.

Timeline for Action Step #2 for Teachers: Wellness Check-Ins

The building principal will check in with each teacher twice yearly, using the check-in tool provided in Figure 4; specifically, this will take place once a semester. The principal will create a Google document of available timeslots throughout the year, and teachers will sign up for their one-on-one sessions. These meetings can take place before school, during teacher prep
time, or after school. The meeting times will be finalized by September 2024 so that wellness check-ins can begin in October 2024. In addition to two meetings, the principal will also be encouraged to do an informal check-in and farewell to teachers in May 2025 before they disembark for summer vacation.

**Timeline for Action Step #3 for Teachers: Differentiated Professional Development**

The goal of this plan is to have at least three full-day professional development sessions and two early dismissal sessions incorporating a spectrum of differentiated options for teacher workshops, as well as teacher wellness strategies. This will be approved by administrators and the school board at the board meeting in June 2024. The 2023-2024 Google Survey gives indicators of which areas teachers currently need help with. This information will be used to plan a differentiated PD session, which will occur in October 2024. After this professional learning takes place, a survey will be sent to teachers to gauge effectiveness and to gain understanding for what future learning would entail. Future PD sessions will be planned in November 2024 during the building leadership team meeting, and the next differentiated PD will take place in January 2025. Following the same strategies to gain feedback from teachers, a third PD will take place in March 2025. The wellness session professional development sessions will take place in December 2024 and April 2025, for 2 hours each time.

**Timeline for Action Step #1 for Students**

The changes to scheduling will transpire before students return to school in August 2024. Before school begins in August, there are 3 planned full-day professional development sessions. Teachers will be given work time on the second day of PD with their grade-alike partner and instructional coach to create a new schedule, incorporating at least 2 recesses and 15 minutes of
free play time. This information will be housed in a master schedule Google document, which the building principal, building leadership team, teachers, and associates can refer to throughout the school year.

**Barriers and Challenges**

The biggest barrier foreseen with this school improvement plan is that administrators will see wellness initiatives for teachers as unnecessary and frivolous. When this plan is proposed in June 2024, data will be presented in tandem about how teacher burnout can cause teachers to leave the profession altogether. Teacher attrition is occurring disproportionately in schools enrolling low-income and ethnic minority students. Retaining novice teachers, in particular, is a challenge for these schools (Amitai et al., 2022). Indeed, when job satisfaction for teachers is lacking, the trickle-down effect is seen for students and impacts them the most.

Administrators and school board members may be feeling pressure for high student achievement, and as a result might be hesitant to try a different approach for teacher learning. Sanction-based accountability pressure appears to make the principalship more stressful and lead to turnover (Mitani, 2018). The idea of trying something new and straying from a familiar path is a potential barrier. Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary has specific building learning goals, and previous professional development sessions have been consistently based around those objectives; however, pushing for higher student achievement and the pressures felt by teachers as a result isn’t necessarily a beneficial use of time. Teachers may also feel uncomfortable to branch out and try something new, in order to grow. Similar to administrators, lack of buy-in from teachers is a potential barrier.

**Data Collection**
Students in grades 3-6 will complete a Leader In Me survey in December 2024 and April 2025, with the same questions asked in the spring 2022 and winter 2022 version (see Table 3 above). Percentage points will be examined in each category, and professional development time will be allocated in May 2025 to take a deep dive into both improvements and discrepancies in the data. This information will be used to gauge overall student happiness and wellness, and will be shared at the school board meeting in June 2025.

The number of office referrals (ODRs) per grade level for each month will be collected and charted in a table. The goal for the structure changes in this school improvement plan is to decrease ODRs and see less inappropriate behavior exhibited at school. The number of ODRs from the 2024-2025 school year will be compared to the data collected in Table 1 above. If teacher morale is improving through the changes made in the professional development structure, the results should be revealing increased student effectiveness as well. Good education is impossible without good teaching; good teaching is largely dependent on teachers’ job satisfaction (Lüleci et al., 2018). Teachers will be given a Google survey with the same four questions asked in the 2023-2024 survey. The data will be compared between the two surveys to determine whether teachers are less stressed at school, and what areas are sought for improvement in the future.

**Conclusion**

Despite the vast array of research on how play benefits children, free play and guided play in classrooms across the globe are being minimized or reduced. This is largely due to pressures felt by teachers and administrators to achieve prescribed academic goals. Play is inherent for children and should be a key piece in any early childhood program. In humans, play is apparent throughout cultures, and it occurs in most non-human mammalian species, as well as
in certain birds and reptiles (Nijhof et al., 2018). The principal finding from this research is that play is valuable for students socially, emotionally, cognitively, physically, and academically (Heang et al., 2021). Despite the overwhelming evidence that supports this, instruction in kindergarten settings is found primarily to include direct instruction, which is more of a passive learning approach. Due to academic demands and pressures placed on teachers and administrators, playtime for children is being minimized or reduced in schools. This is especially true in the United States.

Sadly, even recess time for children is being reduced in order to achieve academic benchmarks. As is the case at Edgewood-Colesburg Elementary, students in Grades 1-6 are given only one break, in the form of recess, for the entire school day. It’s hypothesized that student behaviors are on the rise, due to lack of breaks and free play. This school improvement plan focuses on giving students more recesses and free play time, in an effort to reduce ODRs and improve student well-being. Data will be collected in the form of a Leader In Me survey and quantity of office referrals to gauge the plan’s improvement and effectiveness.

This school improvement plan also emphasizes necessary changes for teachers in order to ultimately improve student success. The changes involve: changing the structure of learning labs, incorporating teacher wellness strategies, and changing the structure of professional development to include differentiation. Investing in teachers is valuable, as they are responsible for controlling the daily weather and creating a culture of kindness, respect, and trust in the classroom. Previous research has demonstrated that teacher-child relationship quality and classroom emotional climate are each related to children’s social-emotional and academic development (Rucinski et al., 2018). Through support from administrators, instructional coaches, the building leadership
team, and the school board, a different approach for supporting teachers can be successful and will, therefore, ultimately benefit the most important individuals of all: the students.
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