

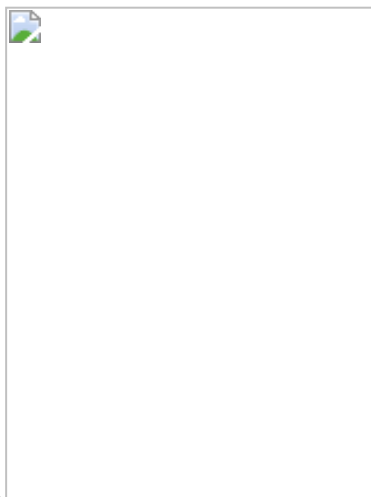
How Canyons School District Improved Outcomes District-Wide With Playworks

1. Meg Duff, Marketing Manager
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1. [District Success](#)

When Utah introduced new state PE standards in 2015, Canyons knew they needed to act quickly. At the same time, they didn't want to lose sight of their highest-priority strategies for their 29 schools.

“We were really addressing four things at once,” recalls Allan Whitmore, Canyons’ evidence based learning specialist. “In addition to common teacher prep time and state PE guidelines, we were working furiously to get a systematic social skills program in place and consistently implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).”



The solution? Start with recess.

Canyons had already seen the impact recess could make in schools. After launching Playworks in 2012, Canyons’ four Title I schools saw behavioral referrals decrease 90%. As Allan sees it, “Playworks is PBIS on the playground.” Teachers reclaimed 20 minutes of class time per week because students were more focused and less disruptive after recess.

“This has been the single best intervention we’ve used that positively affected all students and teachers,” said Karen Sterling, director of student advocacy and access for Canyons School District.

Allan Whitmore (photo to the right) is evidence-based learning specialist for Canyons School District.

District innovation

Inspired by their experience with Playworks, Canyons decided to create a PE curriculum aligned with state standards which teaches students new games to try at recess. Canyons also decided to bring Playworks to all 29 elementary schools in the district.

Wins for teachers and aids

At the beginning of the year, teachers and staff who supervise recess are trained by Playworks to make physical activity engaging and to make recess a time when students practice positive social skills.

Instead of standing on the sidelines, instructional technicians and recess supervisors now come to school in tennis shoes, ready to engage. Canyons increased compensation for instructional technicians to hire and retain staff who could not only support recess supervisors but also teach their new PE curriculum.

“In Utah, we don’t have licensed PE teachers. PE is left up to the classroom teachers,” Allan explains. This staffing structure creates time for more common prep during the day for teachers and equips aides to make a bigger impact on school culture.

Physical activity for all students

Playworks is already creating an impact districtwide. “In the past,” Allan shared, “athletic students got really good at dodgeball, and non-athletic students got really good at making up excuses not to play dodgeball!”

Now, Canyons’ students all know games they enjoy, know the rules, and feel included, meaning they are more likely to be active both during PE class and at recess. Ninety-nine percent of Canyons’ school staff surveyed report that more students are physically active thanks to Playworks.

Social Skills and School Culture

Recess is also a natural lab for social learning. Across the district, Canyons’ students are practicing positive social skills on the playground. Students resolve their own conflicts using rock, paper, scissors. They become comfortable playing with peers with different genders, ages, and cliques.

Ninety-six percent of Canyons’ school staff surveyed reported that students cooperate more at recess and in class, and 94% report more students using conflict-resolution strategies.

District-wide change management

Playworks helps districts around the country find creative ways to improve student outcomes, starting with recess. “The Playworks staff really became a part of our team,” said Allan. Canyons expects a multi-year learning process with schools moving through services over time depending on their support needs. On-site observations and tactical support help principals and district administrators assess implementation.

The aim for all schools, says Allan, is independence. “The goal is to get really good at the structure Playworks creates at recess so that schools can eventually implement that on their own. As a district, our role is to incentivise that.”