



## Wisconsin schools reap long-term benefits by reinstating play in prek-k classrooms

### The Challenge

According to a 2009 report by Alliance for Childhood<sup>1</sup>, children in all-day kindergartens typically spend four to six times as much time in literacy, mathematics, and test taking and preparation as in free play. This emphasis is detrimental to long-term academic achievement and well-being, according to McREL Principal Researcher Elena Bodrova.

### Strategic Solution

Bodrova and Gwendolyn Coe, an early childhood education professor at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, are working to increase the amount of structured play time for children in 31 small, rural districts in Wisconsin through a three-year, \$262,455 federal grant. Two cohorts have participated in each three-year grant cycle (50 teachers in 2004–2007, 75 teachers in 2007–2010).

Bodrova and Coe are training teachers in strategies that allow children to learn self-regulation. A key strategy is structured, dramatic play, which encourages emotional and physical self-control, patience, and focused attention for extended periods. With these skills, oral/written communication and mathematics abilities improve in the long term as children acquire executive functions (self-regulating abilities), the ability to reason, and the use of language at a higher level.

### Results

Participating teachers see improved outcomes in oral language, vocabulary, and phonological and phonemic awareness. Kindergarten teacher Laura Rhode, for example, who has implemented role playing, scaffolded writing, and use of daily questions, says that children connect sounds and symbols earlier, and their writing is more detailed.

### Next Steps

Though the number of participating teachers is limited, the program has built-in sustainability and is cost-effective. Following the training in the strategies, teachers return to their schools to mentor others. Three school districts now provide on-site professional development and operate as models, so that mentoring will continue beyond the funding period.

<sup>1</sup> Miller, E., & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*. College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood.

## Providing whole-child student supports

McREL's work in Wisconsin uses play to give young students the cognitive and psychosocial skills they need to become successful long-term learners. As children begin to develop their literacy and mathematics skills, McREL can help your students get the support they need by showing educators how to scaffold learning at the right time and in the right way.

### Early learning

Scaffolding learning is the basis of McREL's early learning services. We show you how to give children more support at the beginning stages of learning and less support as they become more proficient, in a way that builds their skills and confidence as independent learners. Schools nationwide, including Early Reading First grantees, have used McREL's scaffolding approach to literacy instruction to improve reading achievement. We also offer a variety of early learning workshops focused on topics such as school readiness, meeting standards for literacy and mathematics, and enhancing the literacy environment in the classroom.

### Extended learning (out-of-school time programs)

In addition to giving young children the right start in the classroom, McREL can help your school system make the most of out-of-school time programs (afterschool and summer school) to ensure that the benefits of early childhood programs don't fade as students grow older.

Through expert consultation, custom services, and staff development, we can help your school or district use afterschool and summer learning as a way to motivate students; address social, emotional, and academic needs; and open new doors to learning.

For more information on our services related to early childhood education or extended learning, e-mail [info@mcrel.org](mailto:info@mcrel.org), or contact McREL at 800.781.0156.

