

Engaging Students in Education through Guided Play

Why you should support Senate Bill 1596, relating to play-based learning

The publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983 led to many education reform efforts in the United States, including the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 and the Common Core State Standards begun in 2010. Despite over 40 years of efforts and a narrowing of the curricula to focus on the assessed subjects of math and reading, test scores have shown little change. Instead, these "reforms" have led to more stressful and less engaging classroom environments. Significant achievement gaps for low-income and minority students also remain. The pandemic has further aggravated these disparities. A new approach to education is needed, one that is informed by the science of learning which emphasizes Guided Play driven by pedagogical goals to reengage students, families and teachers.

Principle #1: Integrating Community Values into Guided Play

To emphasize education's relevance, Guided Play should bridge the gaps between home, the communities and schools by incorporating students' family values and community knowledge. Respecting and validating community voices in classroom curricula can enhance children's learning experiences and sense of inclusion.

Principle #2: Using Learning Science

Children learn best when they are actively engaged in personally meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, and joyful activities. Guided Play integrates these principles and can take various forms, from free play to guided play and playful instruction. *Research supports the benefits of guided play driven by learning goals across different subjects, highlighting its effectiveness over free play and traditional direct instruction.* Key elements of this approach include active engagement, meaningful connections, social interaction, iterative processes, and joyfulness. Guided Play can be incorporated into all subjects, since it is a pedagogical technique, not a new course.

Principle #3: Transferable Skills: Important for Success Today and Essential in the Future

Beyond academic content, students need to develop a range of skills for success in school and life. These include collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creative innovation, content, and confidence, collectively known as the 6 Cs. These skills are essential for personal and professional success and can be nurtured by Guided Play through effective scaffolding and teacher-selected learning goals. They are particularly important in home and work environments that are increasingly dominated by social media, artificial intelligence and robots. Educators should create learning environments that promote these skills alongside traditional academic content.

General Recommendations

Educators should adopt a three-part strategy for effective learning: incorporating community values, applying the science of how children learn, and focusing on the skills needed for success. This involves professional development, classroom design, and practices that support guided play and holistic skill development. Simple steps include creating opportunities for guided play, giving children more agency, asking open-ended questions, documenting learning, engaging families, and promoting the 6 Cs.

Oregon Public Education Network

David Crandall, Carol Greenough, Pat Eck, Jan Eck, Gregg Heacock, David LaPorte, Larry Lewin, Liz Marlia-Stein, Ross Swartzendruber, Mary Thamann