

Submitter: Sarah Gooding
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Education
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1596

My name is Sarah Gooding, and I am a teacher with 8 years of experience as a kindergarten educator. I am sharing my perspective to describe the essential role play-based learning has in supporting student growth, engagement, and academic success in the early grades.

In recent years, I have observed a significant shift in the skills children bring with them into the classroom. Many students are entering kindergarten with fewer developed social-emotional skills than in the past. Skills such as self-regulation, cooperation, problem-solving, and communication are emerging later and often need more intentional support within the school day. Play-based learning is one of the most effective and developmentally appropriate ways to address these needs. Students practice navigating social interactions, managing emotions, resolving conflicts, and taking on different perspectives through play. These skills are foundational, not only for academic learning but for lifelong success. Play is not separate from instruction. It is instruction. When engaged in play, students naturally integrate literacy, math, language, and critical thinking skills. They are writing lists, counting and comparing objects, planning, and explaining their thinking, all while fully engaged in the learning process. Play-based learning increases student motivation and stamina. When children are actively involved in hands-on experiences, they are more focused, more willing to take risks, and more eager to participate, leading to deeper understanding and stronger academic outcomes over time.

I have also seen how play-based learning makes instruction more accessible for multilingual learners. During play, language develops naturally and authentically. Students are motivated to communicate with peers, use new vocabulary in meaningful contexts, and practice language skills without the pressure that often comes with more traditional academic tasks. Play gives multilingual learners opportunities to listen, observe, imitate, and participate at a level that feels safe and developmentally appropriate. I have watched students who may be hesitant to speak during whole-group instruction become confident communicators during play, using gestures, expressive language, and problem-solving skills to engage with their peers. Through play-based learning, multilingual learners are able to fully access the curriculum while building both language and social-emotional skills.

Additionally, literacy development is rooted in oral language; as the saying goes, reading and writing float on a sea of talk. Play-based learning intentionally creates space for that essential talk to happen. Naturally during play students engage in back-and-forth conversations, storytelling, explaining their thinking, and asking

questions. This all strengthens the oral language that is foundational for reading and writing. As children talk through their ideas in play, they build vocabulary, comprehension, and narrative skills. These experiences directly support literacy by helping students understand how language works while they are building skills around reading and writing. Playful learning does not take time away from literacy instruction; it enriches it by ensuring students have the language, confidence, and communication skills needed to become successful readers and writers.

As an educator, I have seen firsthand the power of play in the classroom. Recognizing play-based learning as legitimate instructional time honors what research and classroom experience consistently show: young children learn best when they are actively engaged, socially connected, and emotionally supported.

Thank you for considering the professional expertise of early childhood educators and the developmental needs of young learners.

Sarah Gooding
Kindergarten Teacher