

Submitter: Lyzett Gutierrez
On Behalf Of: Private citizen
Committee: Senate Committee On Education
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1596

Dear Senators and Education Leaders,

I am writing to share my lived reality as an educator and to advocate clearly and unapologetically for the permission—and protection—to integrate purposeful play into classroom learning statewide.

While some may assume that play is already “allowed” in schools, the reality for many educators is very different. In practice, teachers often lack true agency. We are constantly looking over our shoulders—monitoring pacing guides, test preparation, evaluations, and public perception—afraid that playful, developmentally appropriate learning will be misinterpreted as a lack of rigor or professionalism. This climate discourages innovation and undermines what we know to be best for children.

Play is not a break from learning. It is learning.

Decades of research in neuroscience, child development, and education consistently show that purposeful play:

Strengthens executive functioning (attention, working memory, self-regulation)

Increases language development and oral storytelling

Deepens conceptual understanding and problem-solving

Supports social-emotional growth, resilience, and collaboration

Improves long-term academic outcomes, especially in early and elementary years

When play is intentionally designed and facilitated by trained educators, it becomes a powerful instructional tool—not a distraction.

This issue is also one of justice.

BIPOC children and families are disproportionately impacted by systems that prioritize compliance over curiosity. Too often, BIPOC students experience classrooms where joy, movement, creativity, and cultural expression are restricted, while surveillance and punishment are elevated. Purposeful play allows children to bring their full identities into learning—through storytelling, role-play, collaboration, and culturally grounded experiences. It affirms that their ways of knowing, communicating, and being are valued.

Families, too, deserve schools that honor childhood as a time of exploration, connection, and meaning—not just test scores and quiet desks.

Leaving decisions about play solely to individual districts or school boards creates inequitable access. Some children benefit from progressive, play-affirming environments, while others—often those already marginalized—are denied these experiences. A statewide policy sends a clear message: playful learning is legitimate, evidence-based, and essential for all children.

Educators do not need permission to care—we already do.

We need permission to teach in ways that align with science, humanity, and equity.

By explicitly protecting playful learning at the state level, you empower teachers, honor children, and support families. You replace fear with trust. You replace assumptions with lived experience. And you move us closer to an education system rooted in justice, dignity, and joy.

I urge you to listen to educators. Believe us when we tell you what classrooms truly feel like. Without our voices, decisions will continue to be made about us, rather than with us.

For educators.

For children.

For families.

For play.

Respectfully,

Lyzett Gutiérrez

Educator and Advocate