

# Structured Places to Play: Playground Renovation Promotes A Supportive School Climate

Harmony Elementary – Vancouver, WA | Evergreen School District

## WHY PRIORITIZE THE SCHOOL PLAYGROUND?

Over the last few years, Harmony Elementary has strived to create a healthy, positive school climate. Staff recognized that the school playground was an important place to achieve this goal and began to think strategically about the elements needed to create an environment that supported positive behaviors and mitigated conflict. While recognizing the importance of active play that takes place during recess on the school playground, staff acknowledged that the playground, when not appropriately structured, could be spaces where children engaged in or experienced negative language and behaviors, such as bullying. Structured playgrounds involve a variety of planned, inclusive, and actively supervised games and activities that promote relationship building and cooperation among students. The school sought to revamp their playground to ensure it offered a physically and emotionally positive recess environment that enabled students to engage in facilitated activities that could promote active play while encouraging positive language, behavior, and peer interaction.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

- K-5 grades
- 725 students
- 30% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals

### ETHNICITY

- 69% Caucasian
- 10% Latino
- 9% Multiracial
- 8% Asian
- 3% Black/African-American
- 0.5% American Indian or Alaskan Native
- 0.5% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

## ACTION STEPS

With the support of a \$5000 Kaiser Permanente Thriving Schools Action Plan Grant, Harmony Elementary was able to realize its vision for a positive playground. The process started with a meeting between the school administration, recess staff and teachers to create a collective vision for the playground culture they wanted to foster. Next, a planning team formed and identified games and activities that could be implemented feasibly and effectively during recess; mapped where on the playground the games could be played; and identified a recess equipment storage space. After purchasing a variety of equipment for active play (tetherballs, basketballs, volleyballs, soccer balls, and nets and rims), the school instituted a process for organizing, labeling, and maintaining the new equipment. Directional signs and rules were posted to designate the locations for different games and to set clear expectations for students' playground behavior. The school principal worked with the school counselor to create guidelines for promoting positive language during recess, and administrators trained teachers and staff to give recess a new look and feel. The school communicated with students and parents about the playground changes, and built buy-in among the school community with a renovated playground debut at a special family night event.

## CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

Ensuring that teachers and staff felt fully prepared to implement the new recess approach and facilitate student participation was a priority. However, finding time for the project organizers to develop materials and conduct trainings was challenging. By engaging teachers and recess staff in the playground visioning and planning, the project director built commitment early in the project, which was key to securing participation in recess trainings.

## IMPACTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The equipment purchased through the grant transformed both the physical environment and recess culture of the school. The project created new physical infrastructure on the school playground that enabled staff to take a new approach to interacting with students during recess. Through structured games and group activities, students engaged in new forms of active play while being encouraged by staff to problem solve in a peaceful, positive way. In addition, the project fostered new collaboration among teachers and recess staff as together they visioned their ideal playground culture. Through the trainings, teachers and staff gained skills to engage students in structured, active games, and support students to use conflict resolution and positive language on the playground.

## ADVICE FOR OTHER SCHOOLS

Developing the shared vision for Harmony's playground culture was an essential strategy for success. The project director initially included mainly recess staff in the planning team but

realized the need to "widen the circle" and engaged additional teachers. This ensured a common understanding about the goal and purpose of the project and set clear expectations - all of which were collectively developed. Effective and regular communication to the entire school community – students, parents, teachers, and staff – was key to moving the project smoothly from idea, to vision, to implementation.

*"We were able to meet with playground staff and teachers to create a vision and culture for the playground. This was a wonderful grant that allowed us to implement our vision."*  
-Principal

For More Information:  
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The Thriving Schools Action Plan Grant Program is funded by Kaiser Permanente and implemented in partnership with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program. Action Plan Grants support schools to create healthy school environments for students and staff. This case study was developed based on the school's responses to the Action Plan Grants year-end survey.

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