



The Playful Learning Institute, PK-3 Evaluation

Evaluation Summary 2023-24

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What is PLI?

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)'s Playful Learning Institute (PLI) is designed to provide training, coaching, materials, and funding to support the implementation of playful instructional strategies in the classroom. District and school administrators and PK-3 classroom educators who teach all students, including English Learners and students with individualized education programs and 504 plans, participated in the PLI to intentionally design and embed playful learning experiences in the classroom. The PLI began in the 2023-2024 school year, when DESE's contracted vendor, Boston Public Schools (BPS) Early Childhood Department, provided professional development and coaching with school teams across districts.

About the Evaluation

DESE contracted with NORC at the University of Chicago and The Center on the Ecology of Early Development at Boston University Wheelock to conduct an independent, unbiased evaluation of the PLI. The goals were to:

- Support improvements to the PLI;
- Understand implementation of the Institute; and
- Inform decisions about the PLI in the future.

What data did the research team collect and who participated?

The research team collaborated with DESE to design survey questions, focus group protocols and analysis plans. Exhibit 1 lists the evaluation data collection activities and the number of participating members of the school and district teams across the five school districts. The research team also analyzed coaching logs.

Exhibit 1. Number of Research Participants by Data Collection Activity

| Data Collection Activities | Timeline | Research Participants |
|------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Baseline Survey | Spring 2023 | 48/51 Teachers, 17/18 Administrators, 18/20 Other Educational Staff |
| End-of-year Survey | Spring 2024 | 30/51 Teachers, 11/17 Administrators, 2/18 Other Educational Staff |
| Coaches Focus Group 1 | Fall 2023 | 6/6 Coaches |
| Coaches Focus Group 2 | Spring 2024 | 5/5 Coaches |
| Administrator Focus Group | Winter 2024 | 4/18 Administrators |
| Pilot Classroom Observations | Spring 2024 | 10 classrooms (2 per grade and 2 per district) |

Find more information at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/pli.html>

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Mindsets and Beliefs

PLI participants expressed generally positive perspectives on playful learning through their focus group and survey responses, which may reflect that participants “opted in” to this initiative.

Alignment with Existing Instructional Goals & Practices

Educators, administrators, and coaches discussed the importance of integrating playful learning into existing curriculum, standards-based lessons, and instructional goals rather than treating playful learning as an “additional” task to complete.

- Some educators shared that it was challenging to incorporate playful learning into the district curriculum, while also recognizing the value of the work.
- 75% of educators who participated in the survey reported that playful learning makes it at least minimally easier to meet learning standards at the end-of-year survey.

Facilitators and Barriers

Both facilitators and barriers to the implementation of playful learning emerged that reflected aspects of the school culture and context, as well as specific elements of the PLI. Some participants identified facilitators that were noted as a barrier by other participants (e.g., materials, meeting coverage), reflecting different experiences with the PLI.

Facilitators Barriers

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaching • Administrative support • “Look-for” tool • Materials provided as part of the PLI • Communities of practice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School schedule constraints • Grant funds not used to purchase materials or fund stipends at the district level • Limited planning and collaboration time |
|---|---|

Changes in Playful Learning Practices Over Time

Coaches, administrators, and educators reported that over the course of the year, teachers incorporated more playful practices into their classroom routines, students became comfortable with new practices, and administrators found ways to support playful learning.

“They were attracted to the mission of the work, and it’s only gone further than I expected, I would say.” – *Administrator*

“The playful learning practices were completely new to everyone in the group. They had never tried any of these things before. And now, at the end of the year, every classroom is implementing at least two of those practices, which was our intention coming in, so I think that’s a pretty dramatic shift.” – *Coach*

Student Engagement

Educators, coaches, and administrators reported that PLI fostered engaging playful learning activities, student choice, high overall student engagement, and academic and social-emotional growth.

PLI Teachers

- “Students are excited and motivated. Students are engaged in activities that are supporting many areas of need.”
- “Students are able to think at a higher critical thinking stage.”
- “Kids love studios from PLI because it gives them voice and choice. They are motivated to learn, collaborate, play, and produce.”
- “[Playful learning practices] invigorated [students’] love of learning and [provided] scaffolds for students who need it.”

PLI Administrators

- “Students have looked forward to sharing their work and engaging in academic language socially.”
- “Students are highly engaged during the playful learning practices...students are using more vocabulary and language across their day and centers.”

Playful learning creates a “more equitable learning experience for students with varying socioeconomic status, cultural differences, and learning challenges” – *Teacher*

Refugee students “are just gaining so much in terms of language, in terms of feeling seen...This child is not able to participate in every single way, but during studios is expressing their learning with blocks, in such a way that other kids are able to communicate with that child. Everyone is able to communicate...” – *Coach*

“[English Learner] children are not always picking the activity that is the less language-dense necessarily. And that is really an interesting takeaway for me...it’s expanded use of oral language rehearsal for these kiddos. Those things I suspected could be barriers...[have] really been quite the opposite. It’s really increased access and equity for those students.” – *Administrator*

Supporting Historically Marginalized Students

Coaches, educators, and administrators described through focus groups and open-ended survey responses how playful learning approaches supported historically marginalized students in accessing learning activities.

How can DESE use this information to inform future PLI efforts?

For the future, the PLI may consider:

- Providing more guidance to school teams about ways to support all learners;
- Providing guidance for school teams to allocate PLI grant funds optimally;
- Include all classes in a grade level when possible;
- Increased professional development and collaboration opportunities throughout the school year;
- Support for PLI participants to engage with families about playful learning; and
- Continue to prioritize communities serving diverse student populations in future competitive PLI funding opportunities.

Considerations for Future PLI Evaluation Activities

- Consider ways to capture changes in classrooms and changes in student growth and learning over time.
- Consider collecting interview data from teachers to capture how they view the changes to their classroom practices to inform future PLI efforts and successes.
- Leverage coaches to collect data to capture the ways PLI classroom practices are changing over time.