

# Therapeutic & Inclusive Recreation Programming in Arizona Schools

JUNE 30, 2020

## Executive Summary

Participation in meaningful inclusive recreation experiences throughout the comprehensive school day is associated with health and academic success among youth. Increasing awareness of the value of recreation and inclusion, knowledge of best practices and policies that support inclusive recreation, and strategies to utilize existing resources can support the integration of inclusive recreation before, during, and after school for all students. This abbreviated report highlights key insights and provides six recommendations learned after one year of an ongoing project implementing inclusive recreation programming in two Arizona schools.

### Project Design

The therapeutic and inclusive recreation programming (TIRP) project was designed to foster school connectedness and valued involvement among 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students at two schools in Arizona. Individualized TIRP programming was developed at each site through a collaborative partnership between school staff and researchers at Arizona State University (ASU), and led by a team of ASU students and a recreational therapist. The recommendations included in this abbreviated report summarize findings from 1) daily program reports, 2) student journals, 3) student surveys, 4) teacher and staff focus group interviews, 5) ASU student journals, and 6) a landscape analysis of inclusive recreation programs, policies, and funding sources in the state of Arizona. A full report that describes the program and research in depth is available on the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council website ([addpc.az.gov](http://addpc.az.gov)).

## Findings and Recommendations

### Inclusive Recreation Fosters a Culture of Health

Inclusive recreation provides students of all abilities and backgrounds the opportunity to meaningfully participate in a rich variety of recreation activities together. Engagement in socially valued, age appropriate recreation activities promotes individual health and self-determination, and also contributes to a school culture where inclusivity and recreation are valued as opportunities for students to develop positive relationships with peers and adults. These supportive relationships fostered through engagement in shared recreation experiences contribute to feelings of school connectedness. Inclusive recreation in schools nurtures natural supports, and optimizes school and community resources. To integrate a comprehensive and sustainable model of inclusive recreation, we offer the following six recommendations:

## Recommendation #1: Increase positive shared inclusive recreation experiences with students and school staff to enhance school connectedness.

School connectedness - or a sense of belonging at school - is the belief held by students that the adults and peers in their school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. Children feeling valued and accepted at school is positively associated with health and academic outcomes. When students participate in recreation with supportive peers and adults, they build positive relationships through shared experiences and foster feelings of school connectedness.

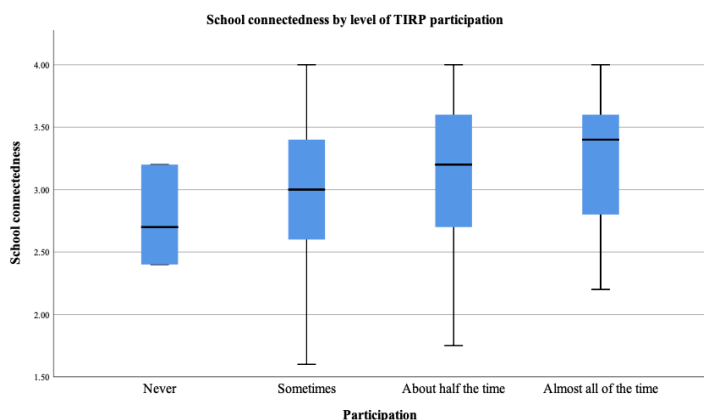
## Mixed Methods Analysis

**Quantitative:** Students report higher levels of school connectedness when they participate more often in therapeutic and inclusive recreation.

**Qualitative:** Student journal entries indicate the top five factors that contribute to happiness at school are activity-based learning, peer relationships, play and recreation, academics and adult relationships.

### Student Survey

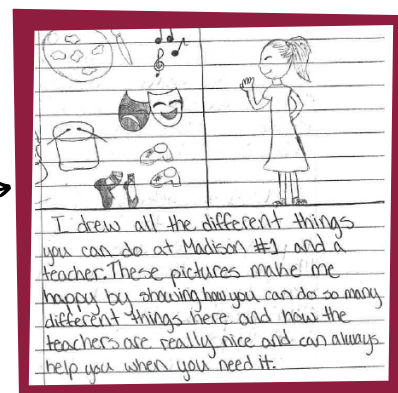
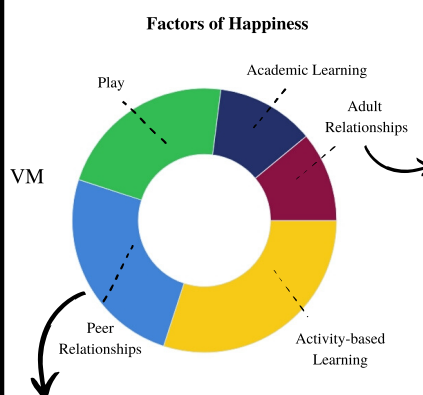
5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students ( $n_{VM} = 60$ ,  $n_M = 69$ ) responded to five questions about school connectedness.



**Note:** Participation was measured by asking students how often they typically participated in the TIRP programming on a four point scale where 1 = never and 4 = almost all of the time. School connectedness is represented by a mean factor score of five items asking if students felt close to people at school, were happy to be at school, felt like a part of school, felt safe and school, and felt teachers treated students fairly on a four point scale where 1 = not true at all and 4 = very true.

### Journal Prompt

Draw a picture of something you love about your school. Describe what you drew. What is in the picture and why does it make you happy?



"We do all sorts of fun STEM related activities like building bottle rockets."

"Friends make school funner instead of going to class sitting there listening to an adult that thinks there better than me."

"I drew me and my friends playing football. This makes me happy because I like being able to spend time with my friends. PS: ASU taught me alot with teamwork and I really enjoy playing games with ASU."

"I like geography because it is interesting to learn about different places in the world and learn their culter and languages and their food."

**Recommendation #2:** Increase opportunities for meaningful inclusive recreation for all students to promote social-emotional health and self-determination.

Creating opportunities for purposeful, structured inclusive recreation in the classroom, during recess, and before and after school can increase levels of inclusion. When students participate in inclusive recreation by choice, their level of participation is positively associated with feeling connected to school, optimistic at school, empathetic toward peers, and interested and competent during recreation.

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"The biggest attitude/culture shift that we need to see is the difference between **inclusion** and **meaningful inclusion in schools**."

Katie DeVenuto – Special Olympics Arizona

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**Recommendation #3:** Strategically implement a continuum of quality recreational therapy, activity-based learning, and structured autonomous play and recreation to promote greater inclusion.

A **continuum** of quality recreational therapy, activity-based learning, and play and recreation can promote greater inclusion by systematically supporting all students, widely integrating activity-based lessons and opportunities for participation in structured autonomous play throughout the school day. Students who actively engage in meaningful recreation develop supportive relationships with peers and adults and build self-determination, contributing to their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive health.

**Inclusive Recreation Model**



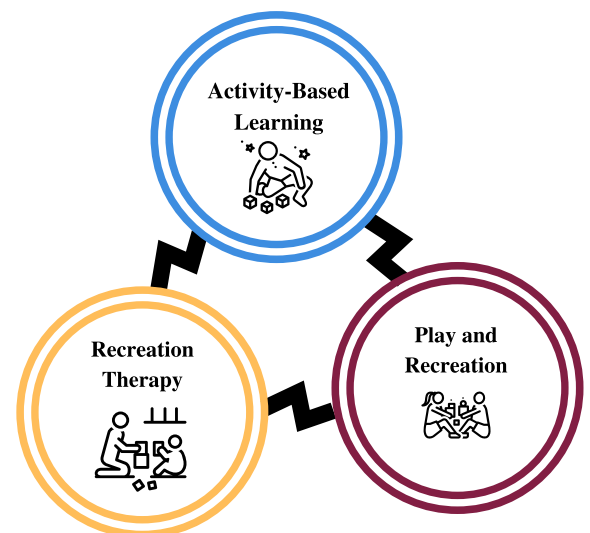
**Facilitators:** Recreational therapists  
**Approach:** Therapeutic recreation/play interventions  
**Strategy:** Systematic and evidence-based instruction  
**Outcomes:** Social, emotional, physical, cognitive health



**Facilitators:** Instructional and support staff  
**Approach:** Purposeful play and recreation activities  
**Strategy:** Structured activity-based lessons  
**Outcomes:** Academic growth/social, emotional health



**Facilitators:** School staff, community partners, and families  
**Approach:** Enjoyable, age-appropriate leisure activities  
**Strategy:** Meaningful and autonomous structured activities  
**Outcomes:** Social, emotional, and physical health



**Recommendation #4:** Mobilize interprofessional learning communities to transform and sustain inclusive recreation practices.

Teachers, school leaders, and community providers participate in **interprofessional learning communities** to collaboratively plan and implement contextually relevant, data informed, evidence-based practices to support student health and academic achievement. The approach can elevate priority given to inclusive recreation, enhance collegiality, and improve skills and confidence to facilitate inclusive activities throughout the comprehensive school day.

"It was cool that I was able to **discuss and transfer ideas** between the supervisor as well as the other leader for this week's activities. I felt more at ease and was able to take the ideas and suggestions that they gave me to take my activity idea to the next level. It was nice that I was able to **exchange ideas in a healthy and professional manner.**"

ASU student

**Recommendation #5:** Leverage existing funding sources to optimize integration of individualized inclusive recreation practices.

**Inclusive therapeutic recreation programs in Arizona are supported by** multiple sources including special education funds and federal and state block grants. Increasing awareness of how to utilize these funding sources can provide sustained opportunities for students to engage in therapeutic and inclusive recreation throughout the comprehensive school day.

**Recommendation #6:** Develop collaborative partnerships between K-12 institutions, educators, university academic programs, and community organizations to mobilize the internal assets of individual schools and external resources in the community.

The TIRP programs were developed through collaborative partnerships between a university, two public schools, and a local nonprofit organization. The research team at Arizona State University (ASU) worked closely with teachers, staff, and administrators to create and continuously adapt individualized programming based on the strengths and needs at both schools. TIRP content was delivered by a Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist in partnership with a local nonprofit organization

and supported by a team of interprofessional ASU students. Collectively focusing resources and assets to offer opportunities for inclusive recreation in schools supports the health promotion of students and schools and supports the collaborative approach to learning and health modeled by the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) framework.

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## Acknowledgements

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### Questions?

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