Early Childhood Toddler and Parent Playgroup

Colorado Springs School District 11

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The goal of D11's Early Childhood Playgroup Program was to create welcoming, inclusive opportunities for families with children ages 0–3 to build connections with one another, engage in meaningful early learning experiences, and develop positive relationships with schools before formal enrollment. Recognizing that a family's first experiences with the educational system can significantly influence future engagement and partnership, D11 sought to establish trust, reduce barriers to participation, and foster a strong sense of belonging within the school community.

The D11 Early Childhood Playgroup was developed by district early childhood staff, families, and community partners. Planning began by identifying opportunities to connect families with young children to one another, for families to learn the importance of play and reading to their children, and to provide resources to families. The Early Childhood Department played a primary role in designing and coordinating the program.



The program provided regularly scheduled opportunities for families to participate in developmentally appropriate play experiences that promoted early learning, social-emotional development, language acquisition, and school readiness. Caregivers actively engaged alongside their children in activities that encouraged exploration, creativity, communication, and positive interactions. Families were welcomed into elementary school libraries for interactive story times. They were also invited to participate in classroom open houses and had opportunities to meet school staff prior to enrollment. These experiences helped children and families become comfortable in school environments before entering preschool or kindergarten.

The D11 Early Childhood Playgroup was evaluated through ongoing family feedback and participation data. Parents and caregivers completed surveys three times a year to provide input regarding program quality, accessibility, family satisfaction, and the impact of the playgroups on their connection to the school community. Survey responses helped the district identify strengths, assess family needs, and improve programming. Families consistently reported that the playgroups helped them feel more connected to other parents, more comfortable in school settings, and better informed about available resources and educational opportunities.

One challenge was ensuring that the program met the diverse needs of families across the district. Families differed in language, schedules, transportation access, and children's developmental and sensory needs. This was addressed by expanding programming to include bilingual Spanish-English playgroups, sensory-sensitive playgroups, and opportunities hosted within school buildings to increase accessibility and engagement.

To replicate the program, the planning team recommends organizing welcoming, low-pressure opportunities for families to connect with one another and with schools. They suggest sites offer simple activities that caregivers could easily do with their children and provide resources about child development. Establishing a no-cell-phone environment (except for emergencies) encourages families to be fully present, engage in meaningful play, and build stronger connections.