



**SERIOUS**PLAY™



When the **people at public institutions**  
get together for **SERIOUS PLAY™**

## The Challenge

### Inspiration wanted

Albemarle County Public Schools in Virginia needed something special. They needed a way to make a 5-day summer program have an effect on classrooms throughout the year. Something participants would be inspired by and share with other educators. The overall goal was to involve educators in a plan to lift the level of education.

The only catch: in recent times, participation in “training events” had little impact on classroom practice. Furthermore, a culture of working independently in one’s own classroom, rather than as a team, prevailed. Becky Fisher, assistant director for best practices in Albemarle County Schools explains the background for this work culture.

### Education is a serious business

“There are a number of schools with a lot of poverty among the student population. There’s a growing number of students whose native tongue is not English. And on top of all that there’s external pressure from new federal mandates that impose stringent accountability in the form of testing and standards,” Fisher says.

“The ‘no child left behind’ federal mandate has some good parts and some not so good parts,” she says. “But one thing I think it’s partly responsible for is an atmosphere where teachers are frustrated. Where they’re feeling it difficult to meet the needs of a diverse population by doing what they have always done.”

## The Solution

### Learning to teach

After trial workshops received positive feedback, Albemarle County sent six educators to a LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY™ training course and began to roll out the methodology across the district. So far, they’ve run three formal workshops using LEGO SERIOUS PLAY to assess work processes and find new ways of working together and improving the curriculum.

At the workshops, participants are divided into groups and asked to use a set of special LEGO bricks to create models that represent goals such as a better way to appraise teacher performance, an improved model for curriculum and instruction, and new ways to work together.

First, they build their own individual models and explain what the metaphors stand for. Then they build models in groups. Along the way, the process inspires them to open up and articulate ideas that they might not otherwise have formulated and shared.

### What’s the big idea?

At one workshop, they found that in all the groups the children were at the center, whether the model represented planning, curriculum or work processes. Fisher says that at first, not everyone accepted it as an obvious fact that children were at the center of the educators out-of-the-classroom work. Many believed that children only entered into the equation as the object of education within the classroom. However, after a discussion, the general consensus changed.

“Everything we’re doing is about children, not about adults. Adults are doing it, but it’s about children. The teachers were now able to articulate and share this idea across the whole school.”

# The Benefits

## Involve, interact and inspire

Fisher sees the main benefits of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY™ as threefold. First, it provides a kind of laboratory situation where it's possible for educators to interact. Second, it gets people to open up and discuss sensitive issues in a controlled environment. Finally, it acts as a catalyst inspiring participants to think in new ways and making the results stick with them.

## What works and what doesn't?

The LEGO SERIOUS PLAY workshops offer an opportunity for team members to see how they function as a team. It becomes clear what works on a group level, and where there is room for improvement.

"In one workshop, there was actually a teacher who sat with her back to the group the whole time. There were thousands of bricks on the table. People were laughing and talking about what they believe supports children learning, and she just refused to participate. What's more, no one confronted her," Fisher says. LEGO SERIOUS PLAY did not cause this teacher to become open to new ideas, but it helped the principal see just how much work there was to be done to pull his staff together as a team

## How to talk about things that can't be talked about

Although in the example above, the issue could only be dealt with after the fact that, in some cases, the workshops offer a safe environment to deal with sensitive issues. Fisher says that the culture in many schools across the country is still one where it's

difficult to have an open conversation about things that need to be improved. Even when, for example, there are teachers who continually do a poor job and everyone is aware of it.

"It's not an easy conversation to have," she says. "It's not part of our working culture as a profession to talk about it, not something we're practiced at. So how do we get those negative practices on the table for discussion? Well, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY offers us a tool for getting folks to articulate their feelings about the work of and even challenge their peers and colleagues. And sometimes they arrive at new conclusions."

## Heads, hands and hearts

LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY™ is helping Albemarle County observe and assess group work. It's also helping them discuss sensitive issues. But perhaps the most positive thing about LEGO SERIOUS PLAY for the Albemarle County schools is the way it stimulates the participants. Educators are inspired, and moreover, what they experience, sticks with them, and they take it back with them to the schools.

"LEGO SERIOUS PLAY's combination of activating hands and heads at the same time really gets things going," Fisher says. "And if the consultant prompts and questions in the right way, it can even go deeper to what sits in the heart - what you believe about kids and how they learn. It crystallizes ideas that may have been fuzzy in some teachers' minds. They begin to see connections. It may be fun and engaging on the surface, but it also cuts right down to our inner beliefs."

# Fast Facts

**Industry:**  
Education

**Head office:**  
Albemarle, Virginia

**Branches:**  
8 departments and 26 schools

**Employees:**  
1163 teachers (including part-time employees) and  
998 classified support and administrative staff (including part-time employees)

**Mission:**  
To establish a community of learners and learning through rigor,  
relevance, and relationships, one student at a time.

*Workshop delivered by Robert Rasmussen and Associates*