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Summary: International rankings show children in the United States perform well below average in mathematics. There are also large mathematics achievement gaps between children of lower and higher-socioeconomic status. As today’s teachers face these challenges, they are also faced with the pressures of sweeping educational reforms that arrived with the adoption of No Child Left Behind and continue into the Common Core State Standards era. These strict standards and the implications of low-performance can easily push teachers and parents towards the belief that direct instruction is the only way to help children learn effectively. In this article, we review evidence from the literature about playful learning as an alternative and powerful pedagogical approach. We apply the principles of playful learning to specific state standards for mathematics and illustrate promising ways to improve mathematics learning in the classroom.

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