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Gym: The Next Generation

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Gone are the days of dodgeball and embarrassing fitness tests. Naperville Schools teach students heart rate monitor training and let students choose from classes like kayaking, rollerblading and Pilates-fun activities they'll do as active adults. Obesity rates are down and test scores are way up.



The hallways surrounding the gymnasium of Naperville Central High School are crowded with clusters of students clicking and stamping their heels as the sounds of their tap dance shoes reverberate throughout the halls. Amidst trying out their moves and throwing around terms like "ball change" and "straight tap," the students are enthusiastically planning out their own dance routines.

It may be unorthodox, but for the students at Central High, this is phys ed class. The tap dance class is one of many P.E. electives students can take as part of Naperville District 203's curriculum. The program has gained national attention not only for their innovative fitness methods, but for linking fitness to improved learning in the classroom.

Elementary school kids hop around on Dance Dance Revolution games, junior high students weight train with heart rate monitors on specially sized machines, and high school students scale the rock climbing wall in the school gym.

A new class of P.E.

The district's program, part of an organization called PE4Life, leaves the old stereotype of dodge ball games and whistle-wielding coaches in the dust, instead focusing on teaching students how to live physically active lifestyles and emphasizing fitness and health instead of sports and athleticism.

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The program developed 15 years ago when Naperville administrators started making small changes in their P.E. classes. Phil Lawler, PE4Life Instruction and Outreach Director and retired P.E. teacher, said they were aware that P.E. programs were being cut back or eliminated nationwide. He said they began to think about ways to teach sports skills to every student, not just those who were athletically inclined, in a way that would affect them beyond graduation.

"We never stopped to look at kids in P.E. classes who aren't interested in sports. What about them?" Lawler said. Over the years the program has been incorporated into all 21 schools in the district from elementary to high school as Naperville's answer to increasing childhood obesity and diminishing P.E. requirements in schools across the country. PE4Life has also developed into a nationwide program that trains P.E. teachers and their communities to develop programs of their own. One of the program's six training academies is located at Naperville's Madison Jr. High.

At first the program was largely funded by supportive parents, but the district has also received grants and now is funded increasingly by corporate sponsors.

Lawler said he can see the effects of exercise on the students in a very tangible way. They are fitter, more enthusiastic about P.E. class and perform better in the classroom. He said that while the nationwide childhood obesity rate is about 20 percent, in Naperville schools it is only about three percent.

Naperville Central High School P.E. department chair and teacher Paul Zientarski said the key is giving students choices in their workouts and gym classes. There are a wide array of fitness and strength activities offered to students in all grades, he said, and all of them learn to use a heart rate monitor to ensure their workouts are done in their target heart rate zones.

At the high school level, the program's goal is to turn the responsibility of fitness over to students, said Lawler. Students, regardless of whether they play a school sport or not, are required to take 28 P.E. classes with requirements in fitness, team sports, individual sports, aquatic sports, gymnastics, dance and CPR training. They can choose from classes such as Pilates, bowling, self-defense, rollerblading and kayaking.

School sports cannot replace fitness instruction when it comes to preparing students to live healthy lives, said Zientarski. In fact, very few adults play team sports as their main form of exercise, he said.

He thinks that letting students choose their classes makes it more likely that they will be enthusiastic about the activities, Zientarski said. "We empower them. We give them a choice. They choose a class because they like the activity, or their friends are in it, or they like the teacher. As a result, fitness has really become a part of our school culture."

Freshmen begin with a fitness concepts class that teaches them what Lawler calls "life skills" - team building, basic cardiovascular fitness, core strength training, rhythm, and natural movements such as hopping or skipping. At the end of the course they create their own 6-week training plan.

"It's really about how to create a fitness plan to keep someone healthy. No one who graduates from here should ever have to hire a personal trainer," Zientarski said with pride.

A focus on fitness

But besides the wide array of activities Naperville's program offers, it is also unique in its focus. Heart rate monitors track individual improvement and activities are designed so that everyone participates in a non-threatening environment. Even games such as flag football are played four-on-four so that everyone touches the ball. What is important is not the score, but that students are in their optimal heart rate zone.

"We don't grade kids on their sports skills. We don't try to embarrass them. Fitness tests are all done in groups or individually in a separate room," Zientarski said. Gone are the days when the least-athletic kids stood shamefully against the bleachers waiting to be chosen for a team or the whole class watched as a student struggled to do pushups during a fitness test.

Zientarski said he used to be the mean coach blowing the whistle, but not anymore. For example, students still do the mile run, he said, but now his students go out on the track and start whenever they are ready. No one knows who is first or last, and they are graded based on their heart rate, not on their time.

"If a student runs a 15-minute mile, but their heart rate is 170 the whole time, then they're doing a pretty good job," he said. "Heart rate monitors have allowed us to assess kids and see what they were really doing, not what we as P.E. teachers thought they were doing. For some kids, walking is best. Some kids need to run. Some athletes need to run stairs at the stadium to get their heart rate up."

Lawler said they track students' fitness starting in the fourth grade. When they graduate, students will have a 25-page fitness record.

"I've seen kids in a fitness class a bit on the pudgy side, not what you would call athletic, and suddenly they get motivated," Zientarski said. "I've seen kids lose weight and start exercising."

He remembers a freshman who started the program slightly overweight and when he took his fitness tests, they showed he was very dehydrated. Zientarski talked to him about how hydration affects brain functions, and the next class the students started walking in with a water bottle.

"I never had to tell him. It was his choice to walk in with the bottle. Now a few years later he's slimmed down and looks better. He's made some big choices," Zientarski said.

Fit bodies, fit minds

However, Naperville's fitness program does not stop in the gym. The district's Learning Readiness program incorporates health and fitness in the classroom. The program is based on a Harvard Medical School psychiatry study showing that exercise stimulates the brain in ways that improves mood, attention span and readiness to learn.

"Sitting down does not increase brain function," Zientarski said. "Your body's made to be moving. When you sit down for long periods of time, part of your brain shut down."

Several high school classes took a workout course right before math and literacy classes. In the literacy classes, the students who worked out improved their reading level by a whole year over one semester. In algebra

classes, students who took the P.E. course improved their scores by 20 percent compared to two percent improvement in the non- workout classes.

Central High school literacy teacher Deborah St. Vincent has her students engage in physical activity every 15 minutes. Sometimes they warm up on DDR machines or stair steppers she keeps in the back of the room. Sometimes it is as simple as asking the students to move across the room to work with a friend of to do some stretching. "I've watched children for years. By the end of the day you know how tired you are. Common sense tells you that you need to get out of your seat. It's essential," said St. Vincent, who has taught for 32 years.

She said she has seen students benefit from the school's exercise program in grades as well as fitness. One student came in as a freshman without any athletic background and was inspired to join the track team. Now both her fitness and grades have improved, St. Vincent said.

Most teachers are on board with the program because they see its results, Zientarski said, and there are others besides St. Vincent who have adopted similar classroom methods. The school has even brought in a neurokinesiologist to talk to teachers about incorporating movement into the learning process.

Last year before the beginning of statewide testing, all the students marched to upbeat music before starting the test, and there were intervals of stretching and movement during the testing. While previous data is not available to compare, Naperville's test scores are among the highest in the state.

Not only does the program make for fitter kids and better grades, but less disciplinary problems too. Lawler said PE4Life did a study in an inner-city Kansas City school, increasing P.E. from one to five days a week. Consequently, the school had 63 percent less referrals and the students' cardiovascular health improved 200 percent.

Results like this are catching the attention of school administrators across the country, enabling such programs to get started and continue. Lawler said that in Naperville, the administration, the teachers, the parents and the community back the program.

"That's the key," he said. "You have to bring the community team in, not just the P.E. teacher."

Zientarski said the success of the program really shows that something old can evolve. Not only has the program revolutionized the traditional gym class and classroom methods, he said, but his own philosophy on fitness. He's changed his own workout program and keeps track of his activity throughout the day using a pedometer. He used to be one of the coaches that kids hated, he said.

"I truly believe most teachers get in education to make a difference in the life of kids," he said, "and I feel like in the last 10 to 12 years, I'm finally doing that."

Melanie Wong is a former Chicago-based cyclist and journalist who recently moved to Vail, Colorado, to work as a reporter (and enjoy some high altitude training).

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