



District 203 provided spark for book

Psychiatrist draws connection between physical activity and learning

By Susan Dibble | Daily Herald Staff

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John Ratey hadn't heard of Naperville Unit District 203 when his daughter told him about Phil Lawler's brief appearance in the 2004 documentary "Super Size Me."

Lawler, the now retired Madison Junior High School physical education teacher, had pioneered District 203's approach to gym class. In a nation where "super size" portions of fast food are routinely consumed and childhood obesity is epidemic, kids in District 203 were taking physical education every day and only a small percentage were overweight.

Ratey, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, was intrigued.

Up until then, most research into the benefits of exercise to the brain had been done with seniors, he said. But he came to Naperville, where he learned that the expanded and revamped PE program was linked to impressive academic test scores.

"The educational studies had been pretty lousy," he said. "That solidified the one missing piece."

Ratey returned from Naperville to start work on his newly published book, "Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain." He'll sign copies and discuss his findings at 7 p.m. today at Naperville Central High School, 440 W. Aurora Ave., Naperville.

Based in part on his research in Naperville, two chapters of the book discuss how exercise improves learning. Other chapters detail exercise's benefits in reducing stress, anxiety, depression, the cravings of addiction, the negative effects of hormonal changes in women, symptoms of attention disorder and hyperactivity, and the cognitive decline of aging.

Ratey said it will be his fourth visit to Naperville, where he continues to be impressed with a physical education program that puts an emphasis on individual fitness rather than competitive sports.

"I never had seen a school that did that. To me that was a paradigm shift," he said. "Every time I go, I continue to be blown away."

Lawler, now employed with PE4life and battling cancer, said he hopes to be at Ratey's book signing.

"It was a professional thrill to me to open up the book and see he dedicated it to three people and one of them was me," he said.

While District 203's PE program has received worldwide attention and serves as an academy site for PE4life, Lawler said he hopes Ratey's book will encourage more schools to recognize the importance of exercise to learning. His hope is that the book will be featured on "Oprah."

"I think if the right people get ahold of it, it could have a major impact on physical education around the nation," he said. "The rest of the country will catch up to what we have going on in DuPage."

Under pressure to bring students' test scores up, many school administrators have yet to recognize the role

exercise can play in that process, Lawler said.

"Schools are not evaluated or funded if kids are healthy or not," he said.

Paul Zientarski, instructional coordinator for physical education at Naperville Central High School, also is mentioned in the book. Zientarski worked with Lawler in implementing the new approach to physical education that started in District 203 more than 15 years ago.

"It's been quite the evolutionary process. It's still a work in progress," he said.

Encouraged by Ratey's research showing exercise grows new brain cells, Naperville Central began to more directly marry physical education with academic improvement three years ago. Students who are doing poorly in reading or math now can take Learning Readiness physical education before their literacy or math classes.

"We have our third year's worth of data that shows it does, in fact, work," Zientarski said. "It was his (Ratey's) research that gave us the idea and impetus to get started on a program like this."

Naperville North High School started a similar program last year, and some of the District 203 junior high schools are using the approach on a limited basis, Zientarski said.

Ratey said he has made presentations on how exercise aids learning at educational conferences in several states, and he believes the idea is starting to catch on.

"Now the state governments are starting to pay attention to it," he said.

Free tickets to the book signing are available at Anderson's Bookshop or at the event. Those purchasing Ratey's book for \$24.99 will receive a priority signing number.

Lawler said those unable to attend Ratey's book signing may contact Naperville Central's physical education department about attending a Feb. 29 PE conference where Ratey will speak.

If you go

What: John Ratey signs and discusses his book, "Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain"

When: 7 p.m. today

Where: 440 W. Aurora Ave., Naperville

Cost: Free; tickets available at Anderson's Bookshop or at the event

Info: (630) 355-2665