

P.E. no longer just games for middle school pupils

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Pupils in gym classes at Kirksey Middle School in Rogers don't play dodge ball.

You won't find kids halfheartedly kicking around a soccer ball, either.

Instead, they pedal stationary bicycles attached to video game monitors. They climb rock walls. And they play three-on-three versions of team sports to ensure that every child is involved in the activity.

It's an approach called P. E. 4 Life, a daily physical education class that relies on unconventional approaches to engage pupils, and it's catching on in districts around Northwest Arkansas.

A task force of teachers, administrators, nonprofit organizations and corporate contributors held its first meeting Feb. 20 to determine how to bring the new approach to every district in Benton, Washington, Madison and Carroll counties.

The meeting followed a vote by the Bentonville School Board to implement the program in Old High Middle School as a pilot for districtwide implementation.

The Northwest Arkansas Community Foundation and the Springdale-based Care Foundation, which helped support the launch of "the new P. E." in several schools, will start the curriculum on a large scale in 2009, to support its priority of promoting healthier adults by introducing fitness activities at a young age. "In so many experiences, P. E. is not positive at all," said Jan Lightener, program officer for the Care Foundation, formerly known as CommunityCare Foundation. "When you have such a wide experience of activities, there's bound to be something that a young person can resonate with."

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY In a typical P. E. class, children spend about 15 percent of their time in moderate to vigorous activity, compared with 65 percent of the time in a P. E. 4 Life class, said Kim Mason, director of Rogers School District's physical education programs.

Rogers launched its P. E. 4 Life program at Kirksey Middle School in 2004. Last year, the school became a P. E. 4 Life "academy," where administrators from schools across the country can see the program in place and learn how to implement it in their own schools.

Typical P. E. classes have large classes playing team sports one or two times a week, Mason said, and student success is measured by knowledge of rules of the sports and a teacher's perception of involvement.

In P. E. 4 Life classes, students in smaller classes of 30 or fewer students play small group games and participate in individual activities such as yoga and mountain biking,

she said, measuring success by their ability to stay within a target heart-rate range verified by a portable monitor.

“It’s taking a twist on traditional things to make activity more relevant,” Mason said. “We’re really trying to teach kids to take the initiative on their own.”

The heart-rate monitors provide a more consistent way of tracking exercise, allowing teachers to objectively critique student performance, Mason said. Instead of relying on observations as students complete fitness assessments, such as running a mile, teachers can track student heart rates to determine if they are working to their full capacity. “A lot of our kids who you would consider the athletes have a harder time staying in the target zone because they’re so used to just comparing themselves to others,” Mason said. At Kirksey, 37. 8 percent of the seventh grade had body fat percentages in a healthy range, compared to just 14. 5 percent of the same class before three years of participation in the program.

MIND-BODY CONNECTION At the origins of P. E. 4 Life in 2000, organizers were enthusiastic about the opportunity to introduce more physical activity to children, said Anne Flannery, president of the organization. Organizers recently completed studies of increased physical activity on academic performance and the results showed a surprising correlation, Flannery said. “It’s really exceeded our expectations,” she said.

The academic connection drew the attention of Harvard researcher John Ratey, who highlighted program successes in his book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. The book details how physical exercise may contribute to the generation of brain fibers, increasing intellectual capacity.

The so-called “mind-body connection” also became a selling point for school administrators who were wary of moving students out of the classroom and into the gym, Flannery said.

“It really speaks to them exactly where they are,” she said.

Previously supported only by anecdotal evidence and enthusiastic students, P. E. 4 Life has gained ground for its proven ability to accelerate academic performance, most notably in standardized test scores, Flannery said.

The Kansas City, Mo.-based organization found that students at Naperville Central High School in Naperville, Ill., improved their reading scores an average of 1. 4 grade levels by taking the rigorous daily exercise class prior to English.

Students in the control group, who did not take the class, improved their reading scores by 0. 9 grade levels over the course of the year, according to the organization’s Web site: [www. pe 4 life. org](http://www.pe4life.org).

The Northwest Arkansas Community Foundation asked Robert Ferguson, an assistant professor of kinesiology at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, to study the effects of P. E. 4 Life on 850 participating pupils at Springdale’s Hellstern Middle School, which launched the program in 2006.

In the program, 775 pupils took P. E. classes five days a week and the other 75 opted to stick with a traditional schedule of two P. E. classes a week. The children used heart-rate monitors to keep them at peak levels of exercise.

After one year in the program, 15 percent more of all sixth-grade pupils scored in the

proficient or advanced range on the state Benchmark Exams, a leap from 69 percent to 84 percent.

Ferguson's results also showed that more Hellstern pupils reached the healthy level of performance in all categories of the state's Fitnessgram assessment after completing P. E. 4 Life. The assessment tracks progress in flexibility, body composition and aerobic fitness.

The study, however, lacked a control element to ensure that improved test scores were a result of the increase in physical activity, as opposed to other efforts school administrators made to improve test scores. The Care Foundation will increase the scope of the study by tracking Hellstern pupils over the next several years, Lightener said.

As researchers work to strengthen quantitative data, anecdotal evidence continues to support allowing children to "get the wiggles out," Lightener said.

"We hear over and over that the focus has had to be in academics, and, as a result, there are fewer minutes per week in physical activity," she said. "We've concentrated on the academics so much that we've excluded positive experiences for children in the area of physical education."

PROGRAM HURDLES The partnership of the Northwest Arkansas Community Foundation and the Care Foundation launched P. E. 4 Life programs in Springdale's Hellstern and Kelley middle schools.

The organizations estimate it costs about \$ 140, 000 to convert a school's P. E. program by remodeling existing gymnasiums, installing a 20-piece set of exercise equipment and purchasing portable heart-rate monitors for children. In switching to the program, districts must rearrange master schedules to allow for daily P. E. time and, in some cases, hire additional teachers to cover smaller class sizes.

"The vast majority of schools would be absolutely thrilled to be able to offer this kind of program to their students," Lightener said. "But for some administrators, it won't be an easy change to make."

To clear hurdles of concern for districts, P. E. 4 Life has a presentation detailing potential for improvements in test scores and solicits support from corporate donors to fund the initial launch.

P. E. 4 Life was originally funded by a group of recreational equipment suppliers. It is now an independent organization active in 36 states. As the organization has shifted, Flannery's role has shifted as well, from advocate for daily exercise to mediator at discussions between schools, foundations and corporations.

The 15-member Northwest Arkansas task force, which formed after a regional meeting of school districts in January, quickly assembled all of the necessary components for implementation, she said.

"I've never seen those groups move together so quickly," Flannery said.

Flannery will complete site visits to Northwest Arkansas districts over the next two months to create an implementation plan before the program is introduced around the region in 2009.

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