

Moving in the Morning

Kids at D.C. schools are showing up before class for a chance to run, jump and play



Children at Orr Elementary line up for relay races as part of the BOKS program, which launched at the school in January.

When Redskins tight end Chris Cooley swung by Orr Elementary School in Anacostia last Thursday, he explained to the 100 kids circled around him that he'd already exercised that day. "So hopefully I can keep up with you," he said.

Fat chance of that. A few minutes later, after rotating between stations dedicated to burpees, jumping jacks, lunges, squats and fast feet drills, and the participating in a round of toilet tag (when you're caught, you have to freeze in a squat with a hand up, hoping that someone will "flush" you to put you back in the game), Cooley's jacket was off and he was standing on the sidelines watching the group do the "Wobble" line dance. "I was sweating," he said. "This is definitely a great workout for anyone."

It's particularly a great workout for kids, which is the idea behind BOKS (Build Our Kids' Success), a program launched in seven D.C. public schools this year.

Founder and executive director Kathleen Tullie, who also visited Orr on Thursday, was a corporate finance exec turned stay-at-home mom in Natick, Mass., when she read the book "Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain," by psychiatrist John Ratey. Recognizing that activity spurs brain cell growth, improves mood and boosts memory, she persuaded her school's superintendent to allow her to create a 45-minute before-school exercise program that kicked off in October 2009.

"Word-of-mom started," Tullie says, and the program was soon adopted by the Reebok Foundation, which has helped promote and fund the expansion of BOKS in Boston and beyond. Starting last fall, that has included Washington, which encouraged the program to specifically target kids in Ward 8, who have the highest rates of obesity in the city.



Redskins tight end Chris Cooley got a taste of BOKS with some Orr students.

The Reebok Foundation is covering all costs for the five schools in Ward 8 that have launched the program, although Ewunike Akpan, BOKS' D.C. area coordinator, notes it doesn't cost much to pay trainers (at least one for every 20 kids) and buy basic equipment (i.e. cones and jump ropes). Any school interested in participating can receive free organizational materials and lesson plans, which include an emphasis on a skill of the week (such as push-ups and squats) as well as games and a "BOKS Bit," a cool-down that's combined with nutrition advice.

At Orr, where students have P.E. just one or two times a week, depending on grade level, principal Michelle Edwards was eager to get moving with BOKS. "It's an opportunity to get healthy in the morning," says Edwards, who has seen vast behavioral improvements since implementing the program in January. It hasn't just benefited the students; it's helped staff and parents looking to get exercise, too. They're welcome to assist lead trainer Dewey Curry, who has two daughters at Orr, Edwards says, or join the adult Zumba class that spun off of the BOKS program a month ago.

Most of D.C.'s BOKS programs have an average of 50 students, but Orr has more than 100 — more than a third of its student body. And rather than do it just two or three times a week, which is the typical schedule, Orr has opted to keep it going Monday through Friday. Both of those decisions have helped it quickly become a part of school culture.

Antione Redman, 9, is such a fan that he pitches in by setting up the equipment every morning. "I've been losing weight, and my mom likes it because she wants me to lose weight," says Redman, who regularly does burpees and planks outside of school now. So does Kym Danny, 7: "I do some jumping jacks at home, and burpees, and I go to bed because I'm so tired."

Those are words all parents want to hear.

"So why not do this at every school?" Tullie asks. With 84 schools already on board, and with a goal to be in 300 by the fall, that dream sounds a lot like a plan.

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