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Students learn to 'read anywhere' – even on an exercise bike

Ward Elementary program seems to be one of the first of its kind in U.S.

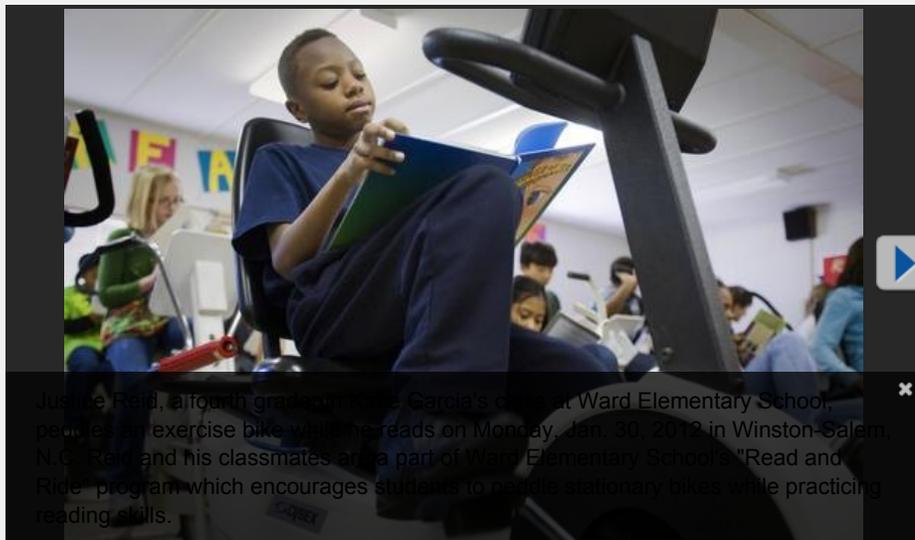
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Credit: Andrew Dye/Journal



Justice Reid, a fourth grader in the Garcia's class at Ward Elementary School, peels an exercise bike while he reads on Monday, Jan. 30, 2012 in Winston-Salem, N.C. Reid and his classmates are a part of Ward Elementary School's "Read and Ride" program which encourages students to pedal stationary bikes while practicing reading skills.



By: TRAVIS FAIN | Winston-Salem Journal

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In a trailer behind Ward Elementary School, students may be doing two of the best things they can for their future: reading and exercising.

Since 2009 the school has collected donated exercise bicycles for a program called "Read and Ride." Teachers bring in classes, usually 15 minutes at a time, to burn off energy and read donated magazines propped up on book holders attached to the bikes.

Some weeks no one comes in, said school counselor Scott Ertl, who came up with the idea and oversees the program. Other weeks – especially the rainy ones 20 classes use the bikes, he said.

"So many (students) associate reading with sitting at their desk," fourth-grade teacher Katie Garcia said

recently, as her class pedaled away. "It kind of opens their eyes that they can pull out a book and read anywhere."

These blended exercise-learning programs appear to be rare in the United States, and Ward Elementary's program is the only one in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school district. One teacher at Kernersville Middle School sits students on exercise balls instead of chairs, but that's about it for in-class workouts, said Nancy Sutton, health and physical education specialist for the district.

But data – albeit limited data – from similar programs suggest they can make a massive difference, not only with student health, but with education.

A Canadian teacher named Allison Cameron put exercise bikes and treadmills in her high school classroom in 2007. Three days a week Cameron split language arts classes into 20 minutes of exercise and 20 minutes of regular teaching.

Sometimes students would read as they exercised, but often they'd just chat or listen to music, she said.

The other two days of the week Cameron added pushups and situps to math classes, she said. All this exercise was in addition to regular physical education classes at the school, and the results "blew me out of the water," Cameron said.

Body mass indexes went down and test scores went up, particularly in writing, according to data posted on Cameron's website. An eighth-grade class keeping to Cameron's "Movement Matters" program improved its writing test scores 245 percent over a school year, she said.

Another eighth-grade class at the school, which didn't do the program, saw its writing test scores go down over the same period, she said.

"The only thing different in these groups of students' day was that language arts was replaced by Movement Matters (for) 20 minutes, three times a week," Cameron said in an email. "While the students of the participating group were exercising, the other group was spending the entire 40-minute Language Arts period on academics."

Cameron said participating students also behaved better and had fewer sick days. And as she exercised alongside them, Cameron said students "let their guards down, and this brand new relationship started to form."

Cameron said the program was so obviously successful that, at her principal's suggestion, she stopped keeping statistics and focused on expanding it. She has since established similar programs at hundreds of schools in Canada, she said.

In the United States, Ward Elementary's "Read and Ride" program seems to be one of the first of its kind. Ertl said he's looked online and talked the program up at national conferences without hearing of many similar ones.

He hasn't kept data on student test scores, and Ward's physical education teacher said she couldn't draw any conclusions about its effect on health.

But Ward's program is completely voluntary, and thus hard to quantify. Teachers have to take time away from regular lessons to let their students ride, and many have not embraced the concept, Ertl and Sutton said.

Many are concerned that the burst of energy children get when they start cycling will make them harder to control when it's time to return to class, but research shows the opposite, Sutton said. Other teachers may be worried about losing instruction time to exercise, Ertl said.

Russell Jones Elementary School in Rogers, Ark., has a more regimented program than Ward Elementary's, but school physical education teacher Lowell Ratzlaff said he believes the school got the idea for the program from Ertl.

Ratzlaff said he had two fourth-grade classes reading and cycling three days a week. Each of those classes averaged 113 to 118 points growth in state reading benchmarks, he said. Classes that didn't participate in the program averaged 71 to 79 points growth, he said.

"Anytime you do anything in a school like that, there are a lot of variables," Ratzlaff said. "But we didn't do anything different with them, other than the ride to read."

Naperville Central High School in Illinois found similar results, according to an ABC News report in April 2010. That school moved physical education to the start of the school day and put stationary bicycles in classrooms. Reading scores have nearly doubled, and math scores are up “by a factor of 20,” ABC News reported.

Broader scientific research has drawn a direct line between exercise and brain function. Harvard Medical School professor John Ratey has written extensively on the subject, saying exercise makes the human brain “more ready to learn.” Another study found that mice exercising on treadmills had increased blood flow to the part of their brains associated with the production of new brain cells.

Which means that it’s entirely possible 10-year-old Wanya Martin, a fourth grader at Ward Elementary, was directionally correct when he offered this assessment of the school’s Read and Ride program: “Helps with my brain muscle.”

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More info

For more information: Ward Elementary School’s Read and Ride program has a website at: <http://www.kidsreadandride.com/>. The Canadian high school programs described are discussed at <http://www.4yourbenefitfitness.com/>.

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