

## [JOSUE VALENZUELA: Exercise stimulates students' brains, too](#)

### CALIFORNIAN RADIO

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#### Images



Those who consider gym class a waste of time might benefit from coming out to Mira Monte High School and visiting our "physical" education program. I was disappointed to read Natalie Sanders' comments about high school physical education classes ("Leave school PE requirement alone," March 21), yet I agree to a certain extent.

The intensity and rigor of these classes can always be increased. However, there are several physical education programs within the Kern High School District that push students to do more than merely chat in the locker room.

Here at Mira Monte, we do believe in increasing the intensity of our classes. Our team of dedicated physical education instructors plans classes that are rigorous and inclusive, and virtually all of our students actually participate. One of the best compliments our department has been given came from a Mira Monte senior, Anthony Segura. He compared our program's intensity to that of the military.

"You're trying to make Navy SEALs out of us," he commented. Even though he found the program grueling, he thanked us for challenging him and improving his overall health and strength.

Since we opened our beautiful campus in 2008, the physical education program's emphasis has been on fitness. Three days a week are dedicated to fitness and improved health. We've got "Mile Monday," "Workout Wednesday" and "Fitness Friday" -- and organized activities on Tuesdays and Thursdays as well, including a fitness version of the game show "Deal or No Deal" using a laptop and a projector.

In addition to our regular curriculum, two of our P.E. instructors have started a fitness challenge program that is open to the entire campus, faculty included. Participants are given opportunities to develop a healthier lifestyle. They meet periodically for support and check their progress. So far, the program has shown much success with the

students and several staff members.

Exercise and good fitness provide endless benefits for all. One cannot deny that the lack of exercise leads to poor fitness and contributes to myriad medical and health problems. Having recently returned from the National Physical Education Conference in San Diego, I learned about the latest research that shows the strong correlations between exercise and one's ability to learn. According to Dr. John Ratey, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, exercise optimizes our learning capacity. It prepares the mind to learn.

"It's Miracle-Gro for the brain," he told us. Adding exercise to your lifestyle, Ratey said, sparks your brain function to improve learning on three levels:

- \* Exercise optimizes your mindset to improve alertness, attention, mood, and motivation.
- \* It prepares and encourages nerve cells to bind to one another, which is the cellular basis for logging in new information.
- \* It spurs the development of new nerve cells from stem cells in the hippocampus.

If we want the best possible learning for our students, we must incorporate daily exercise into their schedules.

I stand firm that not only should there be four years of physical education in high school, but I would also like to see it incorporated into the entire school day. I wish every student on campus could start the school day with a zero-period exercise class, a program that has shown great success at Naperville Central High School in Naperville, Ill. Administrators at this school were so impressed with results from students taking zero-period physical education classes that they incorporated a first-hour literacy class called Learning Readiness P.E. Counselors there suggest that students schedule their toughest classes immediately after physical education to capitalize on the beneficial effects of exercise.

I encourage all teachers to have their students begin each class with some simple exercises that students could perform right next to their desks. This may seem excessive, but if we do not continue to instill the daily routines of good health and exercise, our students will be ill-prepared in fighting against health-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity. By taking these steps, we can eliminate a wealth of problems and create lifelong success for all students.

*Josue Valenzuela, who teaches physical education at Bakersfield's Mira Monte High School, also coaches varsity boys basketball and varsity golf.*

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