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Kenston working in Brain Breaks to bolster student performance

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Kenston School District teachers are mixing in a little physical activity along with regular class work.

Referred to as “Brain Breaks,” the concept is part of the district’s Play Blue initiative emphasizing individual fitness and participation rather than just team sports or traditional games.

“Brain Breaks” is a phrase used to describe short activity breaks using coordinated movement and, preferably, aerobic activity to stimulate the brain.

“Emerging research shows that physical activity sparks biological changes that encourage brain cells to bind to one another,” said Dr. John Ratey, associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. “For the brain to learn, these connections must be made; they reflect the brain’s fundamental ability to adapt to challenges.

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“The more neuroscientists discover about this process, the clearer it becomes that exercise provides an unparalleled stimulus, creating an environment in which the brain is ready, willing, and able to learn.”

Nancy Santilli, Kenston’s assistant superintendent, said when students get up and moving they are re-energized, refocused and ready to return to content.

Kenston High School Principal Jeremy McDevitt said Brain Breaks are “critical” for 85-minute classes, standard units of time within the school’s block scheduling system.

Different approaches such as group work and discussion periods have typically been used within blocks to diversify learning patterns, but movement is now regularly included.

McDevitt said some teachers provide specific directions for activity while others follow more simplistic strategies such as giving students time to stand and stretch.

One way teacher Brenda Bush incorporates physicality into her French classes is by having students act out meanings of newly introduced words.

Another teacher sometimes prompts students to move about the room and create various versions of handshakes with their classmates.

Prior to taking Ohio Government Tests students walk laps in tune with music for 10 minutes in order to get blood pumping, McDevitt said.

The active mind/body concept is stretching beyond the student population to include staff members who now often take brain breaks during meetings.

“I think its great, even from an adult perspective,” McDevitt said. “I go to workshops all the time and when you have to sit there for long periods your mind starts to wander and you start to get fidgety.”

In October, Kenston administrators hosted Dr. Dan Lawler and Dr. Ken Reed, consultants for the Exercise 4 Learning organization, who presented a program focusing on promoting learning through activity to faculty members.

In a recent email to The News-Herald, Lawler stated that “Brain Breaks provide an initial and easy step into seeing the benefits that movement has for increasing student attention and focus. Scheduling ideas, transition strategies, and showing staff how investing in a little time for exercise has greater returns in students’ attention, behavior, and learning help.

“ This is a new way to teach – one that capitalizes on a growing body of recent research showing that higher level brain functioning is directly tied to movement and exercise. We are made to be most effective when we move.

“ Equally important to the concept of cognition improving with exercise is developing healthy lifestyles that will have a direct impact by preventing or lowering the risk of major health problems that many people are facing because of sedentary lifestyles and obesity.

As Dr. John Ratey notes, ‘Instead of no child left behind, it should be no child left on their behind.’”

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