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September 16, 2010

On the ball and energized

May 08, 2011 | By Kristin E. Holmes, Inquirer Staff Writer

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Recon

The plastic chair could be destined for the same fate as the slide rule in Laura Gittings' fifth-grade class at East Bradford Elementary School - because the exercise ball rules.

The pupils in her classroom and those in another fifth-grade class now sit on brightly colored exercise balls.

"It's the best thing I've ever done in my classroom. It helps them pay attention," said Robbi Giuliano, who teaches at Westtown-Thornbury Elementary School.

"There's no slumping and slouching," Gittings added.

Since the start of the year in the West Chester Area School District, when the teachers offered students the option of using the air-filled balls, nearly all the 50 youngsters in the two classrooms have abandoned their chairs. Only two students alternate between the two.

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Fifth grader Michael Chan (second from left) rolls down to retrieve something in Robbi... (CLEM MURRAY / Staff Photographer)




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The teachers, who also sit on the balls, say the chair replacement has helped students channel their energy, reduce their fidgeting, and concentrate.

"I really like the feel of it, and it helps you, let's say, focus," said Audrey Coffey, 10, a student in Giuliano's class. "It's better than a chair. When you sit in a chair for a long time, it hurts your butt."

Staying atop exercise balls forces students to use muscles that engage their lower bodies, said John Kilbourne, a professor of movement science at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Mich. The flow of energy that results can have a positive effect on learning.

Kilbourne, a former strength and conditioning coach for the 76ers, used similar balls in his college classroom and reported the results in a 2008 study.

His findings are related to a growing body of research that links exercise and learning. Exercise improves attention, memory, motivation, and self-esteem, said John Ratey, an associate clinical professor at Harvard Medical School and author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*.

"You don't realize it, but you are turning on more parts of the brain" by balancing on the ball, Ratey said, than "if you were sitting flat and supported by the backrest."

But another expert cautions that students should be careful. Fatigue can set in after long periods on the

ball, and students can slip into positions that change the natural alignment of the spine, said Fabio Comana, an exercise physiologist with the American Council on Exercise. Backrests do have merit, he said. He advocates alternating between the ball and the chair during the day.

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