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Todd's take: Exercising, learning

by Todd Chessmore

Lexington Public Schools Superintendent | Posted: Tuesday, June 14, 2011 12:00 am

For many years, educators have observed a positive connection between a student's participation in activities, the student's behavior and his or her academic performance.

In this year's senior class, at least 90 percent of the top 20 students were involved in some type of physical activity.

Statistics like these generate questions such as: Are top students more motivated to participate in activities or do activities increase the academic ability of students?

Relatively new research seems to indicate neither of these theories is correct.

Instead studies indicate exercise increases the academic ability of students. John Ratey of the Harvard Medical School states, "Exercise, good fitness-based exercise, makes our brain more ready to learn."

At the University of Illinois, Dr. Charles Hillman's research shows that after a 30-minute stint on the treadmill, students actually do up to 10 percent better at problem solving.

If the latest research indicates students who participate in physical activity actually learn better and have better behavior, how is Lexington Public Schools taking advantage of this discovery?

Approximately three years ago, the elementary schools started an exercise program with all the students, which consisted of 20 minutes of walking and or running each day. The initiative originated with the belief students would behave better and would be more prepared to learn if they were allowed to exercise.

The activity took place during the warm months of the year, and stopped during the colder months in most of the buildings.

Two years ago, in partnership with the Community Fitness Initiative and Kate Heelan from the University of Nebraska at Kearney, a program called Take 10 was piloted at Pershing and later implemented in all the elementary schools.

The Take 10 program helped regular classroom teachers develop activities in which students could exercise in the classroom during academic time. The philosophy of the

program is that students can benefit from the extra exercise without losing valuable academic time. For most teachers, this program was a great success.

Summer school at the elementary level is another setting in which the district tries to help our students understand the value of exercise.

The students are given the opportunity to swim and participate in other physical activities during the summer school schedule. The goal is to help our students have a positive experience with exercise, thereby motivating them to continue the healthy behavior on their own.

Parents, encourage your children to be physically active. Walk with them. Play soccer, softball, basketball or any other activity during the summer.

It is important to encourage your children to succeed academically, however more and more research indicates that physical activity may play a significant role in the academic achievement of your child.

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