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Blazing A
NEW TRAIL

Kayaking. Biking. Water aerobics. Self Defense. Physical education (PE) class at some schools isn't what you may remember from your childhood. Instead, some schools are creating a new form of PE that professionals hope will leave the old days of dodge ball in the dust.

Traditional PE classes often look more like supervised recess with an instructor sitting on the sidelines blowing a whistle. Today, new PE classes might look more like a health club, says Tom Templin, president of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE). These new classes range from offering students access to cardiovascular and strength-training equipment to offering a variety of sports activities.

"A mix of lifetime sports activities and fitness activities is a really nice blend in my mind for students," Templin says.

With the childhood obesity epidemic at the forefront of the nation's attention, school districts, PE teachers, health professionals, health clubs and others are scrambling to get children moving, but limited funding, unmanageable class sizes, shoddy equipment and little scheduled time for activity makes it a difficult task.

"People talk about obesity, but the actual crisis is physical inactivity that causes problems such as high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes," says Ken Reed, director of marketing communications of PE4Life, an organization working to inspire active, healthy living by ad-

vancing the development of quality, daily physical education programs for children.

The United States has more than five million obese children, and 15 percent of children ages 6 to 19 years old suffer from obesity-related disorders. In fact, girls who were inactive during adolescence gained an average of 10 to 15 pounds more than active girls, according to a 10-year observational study of obesity. And, for the first time in a century, children today may have a shorter life span than their parents. The public has been shocked by statistics such as these, causing PE requirements to become a hot topic.

"I wish it didn't take the obesity epidemic to get the attention [of the public]," says Mark Manross, executive director of PE Central, an organization that provides a Web site (www.pecentral.com) on developmentally appropriate physical education programs for children and youth. "There's too much focus on the negative, and not enough on the positive."

Great Expectations

Manross says many schools are doing great things with their PE programs. Shelly Collins, a physical education teacher at Victor High School in Victor, NY, can attest to that. About four years ago the physical education department in her school district stream-



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PE professionals welcome lifestyle activities and say goodbye to whistles and dodge ball.

By Jennipher Shaver, associate editor

lined all kindergarten through 12th grade PE curriculum ensuring that all their standards, assessments and teaching methods were aligned. The curriculum now allows any PE teacher to come into any PE class and know what's going on. Unlike many PE classes where grades are given solely on participation, PE grades at Victor High School are based 20 percent on participation and 80 percent on assessment, which includes written quizzes and the demonstration and application of physical skills. PE grades are also figured into students' GPAs.

Collins says that unlike a lot of schools, Victor High School is fortunate enough to have support from both the school administration and community. With a supportive director of

physical education/athletic director and an eager new football coach, the school put in a new fitness center that both athletes and students could use. Along with some creative thinking, the center allowed the school to offer more diverse activity options. High school students can choose what PE "block" (a total of eight blocks of five weeks apiece make up the academic year) they want to take just as if they were in college. A few of the choices include rock climbing, water polo, in-line skating, yoga and strength training along with some more traditional subjects such as floor hockey and badminton.

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"Kids feel an ownership to [the class]," Collins says. "If you hate basketball, then you don't have to do it. Kids are choosing what their interests are."

Other PE professionals are adding so-called "lifetime activities," such as biking, walking and cross country skiing, to their curriculum as a way to get children moving for good—not just in class. One estimate shows that only 95 percent of adults compete in sports after the age of 24. Collins tries to teach skills to her students that they can use after they graduate from high school—such as dance, which comes in handy at weddings.

However, sometimes this new PE can meet starch resistance from PE teachers who are used to "throwing the ball out there," Templin says. Collins agrees.

"Lots of times we're our own worst enemy. We have people who don't want to change and just [want to] play dodge ball. That hurts our profession," she says. "If we could change something, I would get rid of the stereotypical gym teacher."

Getting rid of traditional thinking may be difficult, but it's not impossible. The help and support of the administration and department head are important. These decisionmakers should hold all teachers accountable so they can be the best teachers they can be, Templin says.

The Dog Can't Eat This Homework

The new type of PE isn't being recommended without some research to back up its effectiveness. A former PE teacher himself, Randy Clark is investigating which trumps which: the new or the old. Clark, a manager of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Health Sports Medicine Center's exercise science laboratory, is working with Dr. Aaron Carrel, medical director of the center's pediatric fitness clinic, on a study that pits a traditional PE class as a control group against a lifestyle-focused fitness class as the treatment group. Those in the lifestyle class participate in activities such as biking, snow shoeing, cross country skiing and walking. Results showed that members of the lifestyle class improved their cardiovascular capacity and reduced their body fat and risk for diabetes significantly more than the children in the traditional class.

"We were a little bit concerned because these were kids that were overweight. We were afraid they would be labeled as a fat class," Clark says. "But we were wrong. This was a class everyone wanted [to be in]."

Students in the lifestyle class received pedometers to track their activity, did PE homework—one of Clark's favorite concepts of the program—and learned about nutrition. Many times the students encouraged their parents to eat better and get moving with them.

"These are things they can do for life. I'm not trying to bash PE classes, and there are a lot of classes that are great, but budgets are tight," he says. "We're trying to promote physical education."

Many schools looking to try the new program have contacted Clark, and the research team is expanding the size of its study to include more than just overweight children. Clark hopes to have a toolbox out by the end of the year as a resource for schools.

Fighting Fire with Fire

Other schools across the country are finding that to fight fire you have to use fire. Can't get the kids to go outside and play because they're addicted to video games? Then say hello to another children's fitness trend—"exertainment." A blending of exercise and entertainment videogames, exertainment is on the agenda of Redlands Unified School District in Redlands, CA. The district paired with the Redlands Community Hospital after local clinicians started noticing children with obesity-related conditions. The two groups had a think tank and, voila, videogames were on the table. The center will be open by September.

"I'm really surprised at all the attention so far, and we haven't even started [the program] yet," says Sue Buster, director of elementary education at the school district. "I couldn't even guess what will happen, but I know that we're going to look at how to engage kids and motivate them, and that's the hook."

The partnership is seeking corporate sponsors to help fund the estimated \$10,000-\$50,000 exertainment center, which the groups hope to open after

hours to lower income children.

Certified PE specialists will staff the center and train teachers to run the "exertainment circuit." In Redlands PE is lumped with art and music, and each subject is taught by roving teachers for one-third of the year. For the other two-thirds of the year, the class teacher is in charge of PE. The circuit will include a variety of games, such as Wishy Washy (where kids move their body around to wash a window); Dance, Dance Revolution (a game based on dance steps); a bicycle game (that runs when pedaled); and a lighted game where a ball can be thrown at different lights when they flash. Data such as BMI will be kept on the students with parental permission.

Community partnerships help, says Buster, who called them a "win-win for all the parties involved."

Where It's At

Other school districts and PE organizations also tout partnerships as a funding source.

"I'm a true believer that there's funding. You just have to find it," Collins says. "I think 'we don't have the money' is sometimes a cop out."

She has found funding success by being active in parent-teacher-student organizations and by asking large companies such as Rollerblade to donate. Coca-Cola, McDonalds and U.S. Lacrosse are just a few of NASPE's sponsors. Gatorade and Wilson sponsor PE4Life along with many others. Buster also had success asking local game stores to donate, along with interest from Sony. Other options include parks and recreation departments, medical centers and health clubs.

One such partnership even resulted in an entirely new fitness facility. X²Youth Fitness started from a relationship between Orthosport Physical Therapy and other organizations such as Naperville School District 203 in Naperville, IL, and PE4Life. A few years ago Orthosport started offering fitness testing to the junior high and high school physical education classes and providing baseline fitness level to the schools and the parents. They also developed a curriculum including a core functional fitness component that

The Link

The report, "The Learning Connection: The Value of Improving Nutrition and Physical Activity in Our Schools," notes a growing body of evidence that poor nutrition, inactivity and weight problems can negatively affect student achievement. Schools may be losing significant funding each year due to the problems associated with these factors.

- Schools with high percentages of students who did not routinely engage in physical activity or eat well had smaller gains in test scores than did schools with lower percentages of these types of students.
- Children not getting adequate nutrients have lower test scores, increased absenteeism, difficulty concentrating and lower energy levels.
- Physical activity programs are linked to stronger academic achievement, increased concentration and improved math, reading and writing test scores.
- Students participating in daily physical education exhibit better attendance, a more positive attitude about school and superior academic performance.
- Student absences resulting from poor nutrition and physical inactivity can have financial consequences for school districts as well. For example, in states that use attendance to help determine state funding, a single-day absence by just one student can cost a school district anywhere from \$9 to \$20. If such health problems kept children out of school just one day per month, this could cost a large school district like New York about \$28 million each year, while Chicago would forfeit about \$9 million each year in state funds.
- Schools also may incur hidden costs, such as extra staff time and attention devoted to students with low academic performance or behavior problems caused by poor nutrition and physical inactivity. Staff time is also required to dispense medications.

Source: Action for Healthy Kids, www.actionforhealthykids.org.



Photo courtesy of Victor High School

Students at Victor High School in Victor, NY, head outside for their canoeing physical education class. Canoeing and other lifestyle activities are characteristic of the "new" PE.

the schools are still using today.

From the success of that partnership, X² saw a need for an outside fitness facility that could serve as a complement to existing physical education classes.

"We are to fitness what Sylvan Learning is to reading, writing and math," says Steve Ator, director of business development for X².

About the size of a Curves and designed for children ages 10 to 18 years old, the fitness center features a circuit of youth-sized strength equipment, traditional cardiovascular equipment, exertainment and core functional fitness equipment such as exercise and balance balls. X² has three locations: the first in South Naperville boasts 65 members, the second location has 26 and the third location will open in Aurora, IL, this fall.

"We are a complement to what is being done at the school; we're not a replacement," says Ator, who suggests the program can help children become more excited about activity and can improve their self esteem. "There are a handful of students that struggle with PE, and we're a resource."

Advocate, Advocate, Advocate

Besides partnering with businesses in the community and obtaining national sponsors, PE departments are getting what they want through marketing, advocacy and doing good things.

"People can't ignore good things," Manross says. "If you're doing good things, then it's a lot easier to walk in and ask for \$500 worth of equipment."

Some of the latest research shows that physical activity positively affects academic performance and may actually save school districts dollars (for more information see *The Link*). PE4Life also offers a community action DVD kit that advocates can take to meetings (www.pe4life.com).

Creativity also helps. Reed suggests shaving a minute or two from breaks between classes and adding those minutes to PE time. Also, applying for grants such as the national Carol M. White Physical Education Program can bring money and support into schools that need financial assistance.

Sometimes, though, the only way to get what you want is to go straight to the top. Lobbying efforts at the national and state level can help pass PE standards, such as the standards recently passed in Illinois that mandate daily activity for most schools. (For more information on advocacy visit www.aahperd.org/naspe/).

"Working with state representatives, the Department of Education and Health, and coordinators from those areas can help really educate and advocate for those programs," Templin says.

Will PE programs ever get the attention and resources they deserve? That question is still up in the air, but many physical educators are fighting to make new PE the tradition instead of the exception.

"Some of the stereotypical images of PE tarnish our status," Templin says. "We need to move to a whole different level where programs are viewed as very beneficial and of high quality. There are those programs out there." ■