

Getting Physical

A new fitness philosophy puts gym teachers on the front lines in the battle against childhood obesity By Peg Tyre

NEWSWEEK

Feb. 3 issue - Twice a week, Kale Granda, an eighth grader at Titusville Middle School in rural Pennsylvania, changes into his gym clothes, straps on a heart-rate monitor and mounts a GameRider, a stationary bike attached to a PlayStation. For the next 20 minutes, Kale, who packs 190 pounds on his 64-inch frame, transforms his physical-education class into a virtual motocross.

BY THE TIME his teacher, Tim McCord, signals the end of class, Kale's shirt is soaked. He jumps off his bike, leaving his virtual motorcycle to crash into a virtual retaining wall, and proudly shows McCord the results from his monitor. For more than 13 minutes, Kale's heart rate was in his target zone-about 170 beats per minute. McCord is thrilled and Kale offers a triumphant grin.

Ten years ago kids like Kale Granda warmed the bench instead of working up a sweat. Physical-education classes were showcases for budding athletes, a yawn for the able bodied and a hardship to be endured by the rest. But now baby fat has morphed into a national health crisis. Nearly 15 percent of kids between 12 and 19 are overweight-up from 5 percent in the late 1970s. They're also more sedentary than ever. Less than 25 percent of school-age children get even 20 minutes of vigorous daily physical activity, well below the minimum doctors prescribe. Public-health officials predict that many members of the Joystick Generation will begin to experience costly, debilitating illnesses like high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes even in their 20s and 30s. These warnings have prompted some physical-education teachers to rethink their old Darwinian view of gym class. Instead of helping the natural athletes refine the perfect jump shot, proponents of the New PE say their goal is to get "mouse potatoes" moving again.

IN THE ZONE

One of the gurus of the New PE is Phil Lawler, who teaches at Madison Junior High School near Chicago. A few years ago Lawler decided to check his most unfit students with a heart monitor after they'd jogged a mile. Although the out-of-shape kids weren't as fast as the jocks, Lawler was surprised to find that many were clocking nearly 200 beats per minute. "What I learned is that the unfit kids were putting out as much effort as my best athletes," says Lawler. But despite that effort, the poorly conditioned kids were being measured against stronger kids and found wanting. Lawler realized that instead of teaching kids how to win a race, he should teach them how to stay in the fitness zone-the most efficient heart rate for maintaining good health-for as long as possible.

These days, students at Madison strap on heart monitors and work out on treadmills, stationary bikes or a rock-climbing wall. Some try in-line skating or even power walking. When they play traditional sports, the rules are modified so the action never stops. Football is four-on-four without huddles or downs so the ball is constantly in motion. Three-on-three basketball is a riot of passing and shooting. Lawler is now a director of PE4Life, a nonprofit foundation that promotes more active physical education, and his revamped gym class has become a model. "We want to give students the knowledge, training and experiences they need," says Lawler, "to keep themselves fit for their entire lives."

Although the gospel of the New PE is spreading fast, gym teachers have a hard time convincing parents and legislators that gym class is worth students' time and the district's money. Gym is often the first class cut when budgets get tight. Last year only 30 percent of high-school students had a daily gym class. And many elementary and middle schoolers have gym only once a week if at all. "We need to convince parents and school boards that PE has evolved," says Judy Young, who heads the National Association for Sports & Physical Education, the professional organization for gym teachers. "It can be a valuable part of a child's development. With rising rates of obesity, it can also save their lives." Schools in California, Maryland, Florida and several other states have begun issuing PE report cards along with the traditional ones, in order to show parents just how out of shape children have become. The PE report card measures each student's flexibility, endurance, cardiovascular output and body fat and then tells parents what their kids need to do to get healthy. "For a lot of parents," says Sarajane Quinn, physical-education coordinator for the Baltimore County Public Schools, "it's a wake-up call."

Some gym teachers need a wake-up call as well. Many are hired to be coaches who spend their time grooming elite athletes instead of working with all types of students. "We were taught that if kids want to sit on the side and not participate, too bad, that's their problem," says Peggy Hutter, a veteran PE teacher at Kearsarge Regional Middle School near Concord, N.H. "But now gym teachers are looking at all those kids on the sidelines and saying, 'Hey, maybe we're the ones who have the problem'."

But New PE proponents say the momentum is shifting. The Texas Legislature recently mandated more physical education for elementary schoolers, and other states are considering similar bills. Last spring Congress allocated \$50 million in grant money so PE teachers can refocus their curriculum on fitness. That makes sense to Titusville PE teacher Tim McCord. Years ago McCord says he graded kids on whether they changed for gym, hit a baseball and took a shower. "With the health challenges these kids face now, we just have to do better than that." That's a goal that should set heart rates soaring.

With Steve Levin in Titusville and Daniel I. Dorfman in Chicago
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FIT FOR LIFE

March 22, 2002

Elizabeth Brackett of WTTW-Chicago reports on a new kind of physical education program aimed at helping children live healthier lives.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: 30 kids clad in gym clothes pour into the room for their daily physical education class in this suburban middle school west of Chicago, but this doesn't look like the gym class most of us remember. This looks more like the local health club, which is exactly what it is supposed to look like, says Phil Lawler, the PE instructor who pioneered the concept of the new PE.

PHIL LAWLER, Physical Education District Coordinator: It used to be that we were meeting the needs of about 30% to 40% of our population. Those were the athletes. And the others were brought along. They were forced to take what we were offering, but really saw no value in it, really didn't enjoy it. You're a long ways up there!

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: So now PE is more than volleyball and competitive sports as in the past. New PE students at Madison Junior High in Naperville, Illinois, spend their 40-minute gym period scaling the climbing wall, running on treadmills, and using the weight machines.

CARRIE HESNESS, Student: I like this because you get, like, more opportunities to do more exercises and work out your body in different ways and stuff.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Do you feel like it's keeping you in better shape?

CARRIE HESNESS: Yes.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Lawler's program is seen as a national model for the new PE movement that is taking hold in schools across the country.

SPOKESMAN: This is where your heart rate was when you were doing the cardiovascular workout.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: 30% of the schools in Illinois have new PE programs. The impetus for the change, says Lawler, comes from the nation's health statistics. Obesity among children has doubled in the last decade, according to the Centers for Disease control. Also on the rise, diabetes and high blood pressure. Now, video games built into the exercise equipment can help even the couch potatoes. Also on the exercise can change those statistics.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Does this make it easier to exercise?

STUDENT: Yeah, not as bored.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Cardiologist Vincent Bufalino became a big booster of Lawler's program after screening area children and finding that an astonishing 40% had high cholesterol readings.

DR. VINCENT BUFALINO, Cardiologist: The interesting correlation for us with the children was that it was not so much genetics that we found in those kids. It was really fast food restaurant use and lack of exercise that were two of the biggest predictors as to which kids had high cholesterol or not.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: The worsening health statistics come at a time when the overall trend in physical education is to cut back.

SPOKESMAN: Let's go!

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Illinois is one of the few states in the country to require daily PE, but five years ago, Chicago public schools asked for a waiver. Like most urban school chiefs, Chicago CEO Arne Duncan is under intense pressure to increase academic performance and test scores.

ARNE DUNCAN, Chicago Public Schools: The goal was really to increase the academic requirements for graduation as we up the requirements for math, as we up the requirements for science, as we up the requirements for PE, we had to find time during the school day to do that, and so rather than doing the four years of PE, we reduced that to two

years so we could have the more stringent, more rigorous academic requirements for our students.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Lawler says educators who trade gym time for academics are unlikely to get the results they want. He points to recent brain research that shows better brain function after exercise.

PHIL LAWLER: In Naperville, with the daily delivery of physical education, our students in theTims test finished number one in the world in science. We finished sixth in the world in math, and they didn't do that in spite of us. We truly feel we were a contributing factor to those test scores with the brain research that says physical activity affects the brain.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Lawler has found corporate support for the new PE movement from Chicago-based Wilson sporting goods. President Jim Baugh admits that he first got involved to promote his products and the sporting industry. But it grew to more than that.

JIM BAUGH, Wilson Sporting Goods: You have to condition people. Just like you're teaching kids how to read or write or arithmetic, you have to teach them how to develop an active lifestyle. So this is where it switched from what's right for sporting goods to what's right for our country, and we've been on this crusade for years.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Two years ago, Baugh founded PE For Life, a national non-profit advocacy organization to promote funding for daily PE programs across the country. The Naperville district is now the showcase PE for life site. Physical education has often lost out in terms of education funding.

But thanks to lobbying efforts by PE For Life and others, \$50 million in grants to upgrade PE programs was included in the recently passed education appropriations bill. The \$50 million is up from the \$5 million in physical education for progress, or pep grants, available last year. Lawler says "new PE" programs must show measurable results just as academic programs are measured by test score results. At Madison, a fitness profile is developed for each student.

PHIL LAWLER: Don't measure this against any other student. Just measure it against your own ability. This is going to stay in a file. We'll test you again in the spring, and you'll get tested next year at Central.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Heart-rate monitors are worn so teachers and students can monitor their effort level. Results are downloaded after class and become a part of the student's fitness profile. The monitors taught Lawler that even slow-moving students may be exercising at their maximum level of effort.

PHIL LAWLER: In the old days, everything was, "let's run a mile, and if you can't run a mile under eight minutes, you're a failure." Well, how many people in this country were turned off to exercise by those standards? I put a heart rate monitor on this young lady, and based

on a 13.5-minute mile, she was a failure. But when I downloaded her heart rate monitor, her average heart rate for 13 minutes was 187. She was working too hard -- my observation she wasn't doing anything.

Well, technology proved that my judgment in that case, I was wrong, and I was wrong for several years. Now, with this technology, we won't make that mistake again. We will personalize it and we'll give kids credit for what they do.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Far better to measure a student's progress now, says cardiologist Dr. Bufalino, than to wait until the news is much grimmer.

DR. VINCENT BUFALINO: If we don't teach the kids how to exercise early, we're not going to get them to do it when they're 40 or 50, when I see them and they're ready for their bypass surgery. And we have to put a scar on their chest to convince them they should start exercising-- something wrong with that.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: The Department of Education will begin taking applications for pep grants at the end of February.

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Subject:

Fw: Importance of Recess Position Paper

Date:

Mon, 28 Jul 2003 10:55:45 -0500

From:

"Ellen Cromwell-Cecrle" <paradise@loretel.net>

To:

<mahperd-l@mankato.msus.edu>

This information from the AAHPERD national office may be helpful to some of you as you address issues of reduced time for activity/physical education in your schools this year.

Ellen Cromwell-Cecrle
MAHPERD Executive Director

Subject: Importance of Recess Position Paper

For more information, contact:

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NASPE TELLS PARENTS AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL OFFICIALS "RECESS IS A MUST!"

RESTON, VA, July 23, 2003 - "Attention parents and principals: This school year commit to recess being a critical part of the elementary school day!" urges the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE). Hoping to gain more academic time, school officials are curtailing recess and physical education in elementary schools. The availability of recess in many schools across the country is often based on preset allocations for teachers' free and planning times as well as state requirements for student time in the classroom.

"Parents need to know that the elimination of recess and physical education may be detrimental to their children's overall health and learning," said NASPE Executive Director Judith C. Young, Ph.D. "With soaring obesity rates and increased interest in sedentary activities, a six-hour or longer school day is too long for children to go without breaks and without opportunities for substantive physical activity."

To assist parents in supporting this effort, NASPE has a position paper called "Recess in Elementary Schools." Free copies of the document are available by emailing naspe@aahperd.org <<mailto:naspe@aahperd.org>>.

"Time for recess during the day may enhance overall learning in the classroom," she added. "In addition to providing opportunities for needed physical activity, unstructured time contributes to creativity, cooperation, and learning about social interaction. Children learn how to cooperate, compete constructively, assume leader/follower roles and resolve conflicts by interacting in play. Play is an essential element of children's social

development."

Young pointed out "adults do not focus on work or sit in meetings for more than two hours at a time without breaks. Children certainly need similar breaks in their routine."

While recess is unstructured time, physical education is a planned instructional program with specific objectives. An essential part of the total curriculum, it is the role of quality physical education programs to increase the physical competence, health-related fitness, self-responsibility and enjoyment of physical activity for all students so that they can be physically active for a lifetime.

"In fact, extended periods of inactivity are not appropriate for normal, healthy children or adults," Dr. Young said. "NASPE guidelines recommend that children ages 6 to 11 accumulate at least one hour and up to several hours of physical activity each day. This may occur appropriately in multiple periods of moderate to vigorous activity lasting 10 minutes or more."

Children must be provided with appropriate physical activity options and taught how to make positive choices. If children do not establish physical activity habits when they are young, they are more likely to experience the negative impact of inactivity as adults.

Learn more about the importance of physical activity and the components of a quality physical education program by visiting the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) at www.aahperd.org, the web site of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation & Dance (AAHPERD). NASPE is the largest of AAHPERD's six national associations. A nonprofit membership organization of over 25,000 professionals in the fitness and physical activity fields, NASPE is the only national association dedicated to strengthening basic knowledge about sport and physical education among professionals and the general public. Putting that knowledge into action in schools and communities across the nation is critical to improved academic performance, social reform and the health of individuals.

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Child's Play

by Samuel Greengard

For many adults, one of the most enduring memories of growing up is the humiliation of PE class. Being among the last picked for basketball or stalling out halfway up the rope climb shattered self-confidence and self-esteem. Not being able to complete push ups or coming in near last in the mile run invited taunts and teasing.

"A lot of people were turned off to exercise and fitness at a young age," says Ken Reed, director for the Center for the Advancement of Physical Education, part of PE4Life, a Kansas City, Missouri organization that promotes youth fitness. "Unfortunately, we are seeing the repercussions in obesity rates and an overall lack of fitness."

Add to this budget cutbacks for PE programs over the last decade—as schools have pushed academics—combined with kids spending more time at the computer and television, and it isn't difficult to understand why so many people are so out of shape. "Too many school districts have refocused on the head rather than the whole child," says George Graham, a professor of kinesiology at Penn State University and past president of The National Association for Sport and Physical Education.

According to the U.S. Surgeon General's office, 13 percent of children ages 6 to 11 and 14 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 19 were overweight in 1999. Childhood obesity has nearly doubled for adolescents in the past 2 decades—leading to Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and an array of other ailments. Moreover, 70 percent of overweight adolescents become overweight or obese adults.

It's a weighty problem. But now some organizations and schools are leaping into action. They're taking another look at physical education classes and reinventing them to emphasize fun and fitness. "People are realizing that the old model, which emphasized competition, wasn't successful. It is essential to get kids involved in some vigorous physical activity every day," Reed says.

Dancing, juggling, fencing, indoor rock climbing, unicycle riding, yoga, and cycling are just a few of the activities gaining in popularity at schools across the U.S. In many cases, the goal is to teach skills rather than sports; teamwork rather than competition. For example, at Kamehameha School in Maui, Hawaii, youngsters engage in intense rope jumping, croquet, Frisbee and orienteering. At Verde Elementary School in Boca Raton, Florida, urban hiking is part of curriculum.

In some instances, physical education instructors are turning to heart rate monitors instead of stop watches. For example, in Naperville, Illinois, Madison Junior High

School now uses heart rate monitors to measure the intensity level of exercise. In 1988, physical education instructor Phil Lawler measured a young girl's performance in a mile run. She walked and ran the distance in 12 minutes, which most observers would consider a failure. However, her heart rate reached 187 beats per minute—which indicated that she was exerting maximum effort.

That caused Lawler and others to rethink the traditional concept of physical education and performance. Today, he has kids grab a heart rate monitor when they begin class and they track performance over days, weeks and months using PDAs and special software. Teachers grade students on their individual effort level and improvement and kids receive charts and printouts.

Programs such as Naperville's empower young people to lead healthier lives," Reed explains. He notes that a growing number of school districts are also introducing variations of team sports to reduce idle time and ensure that all participants remain active. Instead of putting a group of kids in a game of 11 on 11 football, they're paring the numbers down to 3 or 4 players per team and altering the rules to make the games faster paced and more enjoyable.

One example of the changing mindset is "Navy" football. There's no scrimmage line or quarterback, and teams consist of only three to five players. Participants advance the ball by tossing it to another teammate. When a player drops a ball the other team gains possession and goes the other way. When a player is tagged by an opponent, he or she must pass the ball. The action is ongoing and the excitement level usually reaches a fevered pitch.

According to some recent studies, one of the advantages of vigorous exercise is that it helps students relax and learn better. In Naperville, for instance, students typically take their most difficult academic class right after PE. Equally important: when students recognize the importance of fitness and find ways to make it fun and rewarding, they are more likely to engage in exercise their entire life.

Says Graham: "There is a physical education revolution going on and it is having a positive impact on fitness. The more enjoyable and positive the experience, the greater the odds that a person will stay fit for life."

Samuel Greengard is a Burbank, California writer who has run for more than 20 years. He has completed five marathons, including Boston.

