

Using more than brains in class

New program to start next month will give students workouts even when they're not in gym

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Responding to the alarming increase in childhood obesity, the city is preparing to augment school gym periods with workouts in the classroom.

Next month, the movement-intensive program Kid Fitness will be unveiled in all 10,000 of the city's pre-kindergarten through second-grade classes, joining several similar programs already in use on Staten Island and other portions of the city aimed at helping the one in four primary-grade students now classed as obese.

A joint effort by the city's Departments of Education and Health, the programs are viewed as a necessary supplement to gym class and recess activities through lessons that often focus on getting students moving and learning at the same time.

"Our goal is really to maximize the amount of time that students have to participate in physical activity," said Lori Rose Benson, the Department of Education's Director of the Office of Fitness and Physical Education.

She added that the combination of the mental and physical disciplines is a natural one, in that "early-childhood education embraces movement as one of the fundamental ways of learning."

On a recent morning at PS 42 in Eltingville, two teams of fourth- and fifth-graders took turns hunting for numbered beanbags scattered face-down on the floor, according to criteria determined by their teacher, Bunny Resnick.

"OK. Multiples of 11," instructed Ms. Resnick, who along with nine other teachers was trained in implementing the NikeGO physical activity curriculum adopted by the school this year.

Two students at a time hurried to locate an appropriate beanbag and drop it in a circle on one side of the room. Then they rushed over to hula hoops and twirled them twice around their swaying waists before returning to tag the next person in line.

"I think when you make things competitive, kids are going to try harder," said Alison Ryan, the school's physical education teacher, who also uses NikeGO equipment and material in the gymnasium. "They forget that they're doing math."

In fact, some of the students were even lobbying for a tie instead of a clear winner so that the two teams would be forced to repeat the game.

HELPS IN MATH

"It helps you in math, it makes you work out [and] it makes you have energy," said Daniel Bruno, a 12-year-old in the class.

Fitness experts have said that the influx of in-class activities is somewhat unique to New York City, where outdoor space is limited, and where, on Staten Island, 11 of 41 elementary schools lack full-time, or "dedicated," physical education teachers.

They are being implemented at a time when the school system has been criticized for sidelining peripheral subjects in favor of state English and math tests, and while districts nationwide attempt to push students toward the federal recommendations of 60 minutes of moderate physical activity per day.

The programs introduced for younger students, such as SPARK (Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids) -- which is being integrated into Staten Island's pre-kindergarten classes and 82 day care centers -- also include a nutrition and lifestyle component as a means to encourage students to enjoy healthy activities outside of school and later in life.

While they are nearly universally hailed as positive additions to the school curriculum, some are skeptical about the benefits to be derived from short spurts of space-constricted movement.

"In the classroom, they're not going to all probably be able to move their bodies at the same time," said Dr. Craig Buschner, president-elect of the National Association for Sport & Physical Education. "It's sort of incumbent upon schools to meet these standards and to help students to really develop what I'll call a movement literacy."

Judi Kane, a physical education teacher at Bernstein Intermediate school in Huguenot, said she perceives many benefits in classroom-based physical activities.

However, she added, "to me personally, it's not as successful as getting the kids to really move with scooters or hula hoops, or getting them to move in a space where they can really move and have fun."

FOCUS ON INCLUSION

Candace Young, director of the physical activity and nutrition program at the Department of Health, acknowledged that space is a limiting factor to the SPARK program.

But she said that the activities could also be used in gymnasiums, auditoriums or outside, and that the program's focus on inclusion sets it apart from traditional physical activities that require students to take turns.

"The reason SPARK is different is because it's really meant to engage all children in an activity and be very participatory," she said. "It's really meant to be more than, 'Oh, let's take a break and stretch our legs.'"

Kid Fitness, which is based on a television series about a jungle hero and his animal friends, similarly involves all students simultaneously, albeit with a greater physical component.

Students perform a seven-minute routine set to music that involves aerobic exercise, stretching, muscle isolation, motor-skills training and a cool-down period -- with much of the motion akin to animal movements that are tied back to the television program.

The routines can be repeated throughout the day, and they've been described as effective transitions following lunch or recess, at the beginning or end of the day, or between different subjects.

Ms. Benson said that, in the short term, the program would be assessed for its ability to increase physical activity, and in the long term, for its ability to reduce obesity rates.

"It's not about having classroom teachers become physical education teachers," she emphasized. "It's to supplement [physical education], not to supplant it."

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