



Instructors make pitch for vigorous exercise to improve test scores

Sparking the mind

By David Quick
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Fourth-grader James Gethers rides a stationary bike during an activity period before the start of the school day at Charleston Progressive Academy. At the beginning of the school year, the magnet school started offering vigorous activities, and teachers have discovered that students are more focused and better behaved.



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Sixth-graders Megan Seabrook (left) and Essente Smalls juggle scarves, one of more than a half-dozen activities offered as students wait for classes to start in the morning at Charleston Progressive Academy.

Sparking the mind

Last school year, the faculty at Charleston Progressive Academy in downtown Charleston

experienced several problems with students who had to wait up to 40 minutes every morning for classes to start.

Elementary and middle school students, who were dropped off by buses in the morning and gathered in hallways and the gym before classes, got into fights, were confrontational with teachers, wandered to other parts of the school and, generally, were in a bad mood.

They certainly weren't ready for learning.

As part of a call for innovation at the public magnet school, physical education teacher Drexena Puza suggested offering activities, such as basketball, "double Dutch" jump roping and pogo stick jumping at stations in the gym before classes.

The school started the activities at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year. The kids love it. And it's solved some problems.

"What we have observed is a 95 percent decrease in discipline referrals before school," says Charleston Progressive's Principal Wanda Wright-Sheats. "Teachers have reported that students are more focused. We observed this as well during our MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) testing. ... Our initial observation was that students testing immediately after morning activities did better — meeting or exceeding individual growth targets — than middle schoolers taking the test late morning or in the afternoon."

This result may come as no surprise to "old schoolers" who can remember breaking a sweat during recess or physical education classes. But in an era when standardized test scores are the gold standard, time devoted to vigorous physical activity has been lost.

The pendulum may be about to swing back.

Dave Spurlock, who directs physical education (among other duties) for the Charleston County School District, will be making a pitch to add vigorous activity into everyday school life at a meeting with principals Wednesday.

"They (principals) think more instructional time is the only way to improve performance on test scores, but I've been trying to get them to see the link between physical activity and better work in the school room."

Spurlock adds that some still seem to be resisting it, even though the South Carolina Education Department mandated it for public schools with the Student Health and Fitness Act of 2005. Starting next school year, weekly requirements will increase to 90 minutes of physical education and 60 minutes of physical activity, defined as "bodily movement that substantially increases energy expenditure."

As part of the pitch, Spurlock will offer ways to slip exercise into the school day, such as increasing the school day by 10 minutes and having short aerobics classes, creating class "running clubs," and freeing PE teachers from tutorial duties to conduct activities.

Spurlock's talk Wednesday comes on the heels of last week's official publication of a new book, "Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain" by Dr. John J. Ratey, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

Ratey, the author of "Driven to Distraction" and "A User's Guide to the Brain," tapped into hundreds of studies on exercise and brain function for the book, which covers the positive effect of vigorous exercise on learning, attention deficit disorder and anxiety, among others.

"People are finally talking about exercise in schools again, but it's because of the obesity epidemic," says Ratey.

While our culture, made even more sedentary in the past 15 years because of the computer in everyday life, focuses on exercise to improve the appearance and condition of the body, Ratey says we should be thinking about it in terms of brain health.

"Exercise doesn't make people smarter," he says. "It makes them more able to learn and focus. ... It readies the cells in the brain to be optimal."

Ratey adds that most of the studies on exercise and the brain have tended to focus on the elderly and memory, but that more attention is being directed at youth and learning capability.

Both Spurlock and Ratey look to a school district in Naperville, Ill., which instituted fitness-based PE classes emphasizing cardiovascular exercise for its 19,000 students and witnessed skyrocketing standardized test scores.

Meanwhile, Spurlock also is getting help showing the need, in physical terms, for improved fitness among students.

The College of Charleston has been working on a body mass index study of students in 17 schools in the Charleston County School District. Preliminary results of the study of students, ages 4-12, showed that 40 percent of all males and 36 percent of all females were overweight or at risk of being overweight. The real numbers may be even higher since those statistics reflect only those students whose parents signed consent forms to allow their children to be weighed and measured.

Dr. Deborah A. Miller, professor and health coordinator at the College of Charleston, says the study is still in the works, using college students, certified by the National Institutes of Health, to help. Part of it includes asking the younger students several questions about whether they exercise, how they exercise (and "Do you get out of breath?") and, for those who don't exercise, what they do instead.

Miller says the study is important as part of Spurlock's effort to get school leaders to support physical activity because the college is discovering that Charleston area school students are matching or surpassing obesity trends in the nation.

"We have local data. Everyone else is looking at national data, but this (physically unfit children) is happening right here, right now," says Miller. "If we don't get to these children now, it may be too late. ... Aren't we ethically responsible for making sure our children lead healthy lives?"

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