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## Playing, Learning—and Having Fun

*Adding a little fun and physical activity could go a long way in increasing the academic success of today's children.*

Susan B. Nye

“Exercise is the single most powerful tool you have to optimize your brain function” (Ratey, 2008). However, in today’s school there is very little opportunity to exercise during the school day. Children sit at desks silently reading, listening to lectures, or completing worksheets. To make matters worse, schools continue to reduce physical education instruction and/or recess time to augment classroom instructional time in direct response to the pressure associated with high-stakes testing (Action for Healthy Kids, 2004). With 16 percent of children ages 6 to 19 overweight, and 31 percent at risk of becoming overweight (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006), the time has come to provide children with opportunities to be physically active during the school day.

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) recommends that elementary schoolchildren receive 150 minutes per week of quality physical education instruction (NASPE, 2004b), and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (2005) recommends 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity for school-age children. However, most elementary schools allocate one or two 30-minute periods of physical education per week, and even fewer schools have required daily recess periods.

Many educators believe that an increase in time for physical activity or physical education instruction would be counterproductive to academic performance. However, aerobic exercise had been found to positively affect learning, mood, anxiety, and attention (Dwyer, Sallis, Blizzard, Lazarus, & Dean, 2001; Sheppard, 1997). Ratey (2008) describes research evidence in which participation in physical activity positively contributed to a student’s academic performance by increasing the student’s self-esteem, behavior, attendance, concentration, and attentiveness. A study shows that students who participated in vigorous physical activity at least three times a week—in addition to physical education classes—performed better academically (Medical News Today, 2006).

What if this physical activity component could be harnessed within the school day so all children could benefit? Schools are the perfect venue for a quality physical activity program.

### Creating a Physical Activity Program

There are several guidelines to follow in creating a quality physical activity program. NASPE (2004a) recommends activities that last 15 to 20 minutes, are moderate to vigorous in intensity, are age-appropriate, and include variety. This physical activity program is designed to be facilitated by a classroom teacher or administrator, with a different activity each day of the week in the gymnasium or outside if weather permits.

In creating a program based on NASPE’s recommendations, several key components were always present regardless of the activity: All activities encouraged movement while promoting maximum participation with minimal wait time. To minimize student wait time, each child was given his or her own piece of equipment, or shared it with another student. Music was played during all of the physical activity sessions.

To meet the individual needs of each student, the classroom teacher was provided a movement analysis framework, or “wheel,” to add variety within the daily activities (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2004). For example, on ball activity day, the teacher had students dribble at a low or high level, fast or slow, or soft or hard. The goal was to provide students with variation while they were consistently moving.

Here is a description of the program’s daily activities:

**Mondays.** Students participated in jumping, landing, and resistance activities using equipment such as jump-ropes, hula hoops, and exercise bands or tubes. Music was played and students were asked to jump to the music. In addition, students participated in jump-rope activities such as tic-tac-toe, four square, or jump-rope horse (Nye, 2008). The jump-rope and band activities were interspersed with speed-walking activities.

**Tuesdays.** Students participated in aerobic activities. In the beginning of the program, using carpet squares in place of aerobic steps, the students were taught several step-aerobics moves (i.e., basic, v-step, over-the-top, and corner-to-corner). As the program progressed, the teacher began to use popular aerobic kickboxing videos.

**Wednesdays.** Students participated in ball activities, using soccer balls, basketballs, or playground balls. Students had a choice of dribbling a ball with their hands or feet while moving to music. To create challenges and constant movement, the teacher would randomly disperse cones in the gymnasium to provide obstacles. When the students would dribble to one of the cones, they would have to change direction and keep moving until they came to another cone.

**Thursdays.** Students participated in walk/jog activities. For this day, the teacher would mark a large square with cones. The joggers were to stay to the outside of the square and the walkers were to stay to the inside, although students were free to move back and forth between the walking and jogging areas. When walking, students were encouraged to walk from heel to toe with their arms bent at a 90-degree angle; when jogging, they were encouraged to jog at a pace in which they could talk to a partner.

**Fridays.** Students participated in dance activities. The teacher was provided with music CDs, with songs like “Bean Bag Shake,” “Tony Chestnut,” “Cha Cha Slide,” and “5678,” dictating student movements. As the dance days progressed, the classroom teacher began to create her own dances to teach the children.

### Positive Outcomes and Student Learning

Creating such a physical activity program in an elementary school was a win-win situation for all, producing several positive outcomes. First, an initial concern of the classroom teacher was the manageability of students following the activity sessions. However, the teacher reported that students were actually more alert and attentive following the sessions, a finding similar to research cited by Dwyer et al. (2001) and Rately (2008). Second, to assist students in gaining ownership of the physical activity program, they were asked to come up with a name for it. The name chosen was Fun Club, and students began practicing the activities at home and then bringing them back to the Fun Club to demonstrate for their classmates. Finally, the teacher did not have to worry about students being late for school. They told her that they did not want to come to school late for fear of missing the Fun Club activities.

With the nation’s children becoming more and more obese, schools have an opportunity to take a more proactive role in assisting with this national crisis. Schools can counteract the effects of childhood obesity, while enhancing a student’s aca-

ademic performance, by adding additional time within the school day for children to be physically active. Adding a little fun and physical activity could go a long way in increasing the academic success of today’s children. Captive audiences of children are waiting to take part in their own Fun Club.

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### **On the Same Page**

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. How, when, and where could time be allocated within the school day for additional physical activity (including times before or after school)?
2. What kinds of activities could we engage?
3. What standards will we use for incorporating physical activity in the school day?
4. Are there staff or faculty members who have experience/expertise with certain physical activities (e.g., walking, jogging, aerobics, kickboxing, yoga)?
5. How might we engage community members or resources in school physical activities?