Dedicated to Movement

Maintaining health and fitness requires a purposeful mindset and dedicated practice. The ordinary daily lives of American children include insufficient active play and recreation to build strong, healthy bodies. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that children and adolescents participate in 60 minutes or more of physical activity each day. Yet, in 2007, during nonschool hours, 62 percent of children aged 9 to 13 years did not participate in any organized physical activity and 23 percent did not engage in any free-time physical activity.

School programs should play an important role in helping youth develop the mindset and habits necessary to live healthy lives by providing an active school environment. Activity can become an integral part of the school environment through discipline strategies, reward offers, celebrations, and daily learning opportunities. Students can meet a good portion of the recommended 60 minutes of daily healthy movement within the routines of their school day.

Movement-based Discipline Strategies
As principal of Piedmont Elementary, one of my best investments was an uncomplicated, flat Treaddesk treadmill. We paired the treadmill with a standing table so that a student can walk slowly on the treadmill while reading a book or completing a paper and pencil activity on the table. In the past, I might have asked a student who is struggling to cope on the playground to sit out recess in my office. Now that child is instructed to walk on the treadmill, and then returned to class in a healthier state to learn. Teachers have also organized an easily supervised walking path around playground equipment. Students who are disciplined “walk the woodchips” during a portion of recess, rather than the typical consequence of sitting on a bench.

For those students who can’t handle the noise and activity of the before school gathering in the cafeteria, or who find it nearly impossible to eat lunch without an argument or meltdown, we offer thoughtfully selected active tasks. For example, Mr. Fred heartily greets James at the custodial closet every morning and hands him his “tool,” a broom stick with a tennis ball on one end. James busily applies the tool to scuff marks on the floor, a more constructive opening to his day than the usual cafeteria scuffle. A fourth grader, Cody, walks to the recycle bin every afternoon during his most difficult behavior portion of the day, carrying as many recyclable catalogs as I can safely pile into his bucket. Mary and her special education aide deliver “messages” from one end of the long building to the other any time those telltale fidgets signal an impending meltdown.

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Reward Programs and Celebrations
The hottest items in our Accelerated Reader store are the activity-based rewards such as a climbing wall trip to the neighboring middle school or a dodge ball game with the PE teacher. We have awarded activity-based field trips for everything from academic excellence to PTO fundraising success. We celebrate activity in many of our weekly “Wildcat Wake Up” assemblies. I encourage students and staff to showcase Irish dance skills, karate moves, or any other active skill. We sing songs that feature entertaining movement. One of my favorite assembly surprises was when fifth grade students, led by our PE teacher, broke into a “flash dance” to the sound of “This Book’s Gonna be a Good Book,” in Black-Eyed-Peas musical style!

Creative Ideas
Once teachers commit to the goal of including movement in our education day, they seek and seize opportunities for movement that can be woven seamlessly into daily activities. One teacher assigns 10 push-ups and 10 sit-ups to follow morning bell-work each day. As students return to their desks from depositing their morning paper in the appropriate bin, they simply drop beside their desks and complete the calisthenics. Some teachers perform Brain Gym activities between academic subjects. One teacher taught her class to jog along together in military style, often taking the long way around to specials classes or the cafeteria just to get in another round of cadence.

Robust Recess and Physical Education
Physical education and recess periods present a rare opportunity for sustained movement, so we promote active participation. Our PE teacher keeps maximum movement in mind as he plans for the PE period. He chooses games or skill drills that involve many children moving at once, with little time for standing around. The highly recommended SPARK curriculum is based on this kind of full participation.

Our recess period is well organized, promoting higher levels of participation from students, less standing on the sidelines, and less time spent arguing. Play areas are clearly mapped out for football, soccer, basketball, four-square, and jump rope/hula hoop. We make sure balls and equipment are in good repair and easily accessible for each area. Over the years, the PTO has helped us to purchase and maintain playground swings,
The author believes schools have a role in ensuring kids get enough physical activity. Is this possible in today’s high stakes testing environment? Share your thoughts on the Principals’ Office blog at www.naesp.org/blog. Click on Speaking Out.

After we purchased a plan for playground games from Peaceful Playgrounds that included a map and game instructions, as well as conflict management strategies, a local Eagle Scout spent his summer painting the games on the pavement in bright colors. As recommended by Peaceful Playgrounds, we trained all teachers and students to implement “walk, talk, or rock,” which means that, in a playground dispute, students can walk away to play in another area, talk it out, or abide by the rock-paper-scissors decision. They also know that “You can’t say you can’t play.” We don’t exclude a student who wants to join the game. This year we plan to add organized games on an open area of the field that will be led by trained dads on duty as part of our volunteer Watch D.O.G.S (Dads of Great Students) program. These steps have led to a more active and peaceful playground experience that allows students to return to class ready to learn.

Even students who participate in local sports leagues or attend dance or karate classes outside of school a few times a week need the support of school programs in order to meet the CDC’s recommended 60 minutes of activity a day. As part of program planning sessions, my staff and I often ask ourselves how we can include movement in the implementation of programs. By thoughtful inclusion of activity throughout our school day, Piedmont Elementary partners with students, staff, the community, and parents in developing the health and fitness of our children.

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