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'New PE' objective: Get kids in shape

By Tom Weir, USA TODAY

OWENSBORO, Ky. — There's a daunting parallel that public health officials apply to the national epidemic of childhood obesity. It's that we're stuck, just like in the 1950s, when the nation realized smoking was a huge problem yet still took decades to make meaningful change.



Students wait to have their mileage card stamped by mother Pam Russell after walking before school. Russell's son, Marcus, is the mileage leader at the school.

By David Cooper, USA TODAY

Amid the stall, some health experts suggest that if today's youth keep super-sizing meals while downsizing physical activity, they risk becoming the first generation of Americans to have a shorter life expectancy than that of their parents because of obesity-related heart disease and diabetes.

But for those who see improved physical education programs as a catalyst that can curb childhood obesity in less time than it took to create the first restaurant non-smoking sections, one unlikely role model has emerged on the southern bank of the Ohio River.

Owensboro is a Tobacco Belt city in western Kentucky that was nicknamed "The Fast Food Capital of the World" in the late 1980s, when it was found to order more food-to-go per capita than anywhere else. But now its school systems are running an intense physical education program aimed at instilling a lifetime approach to fitness among students.

The PE overhaul came after a study in 2000 found 60% of the Owensboro area's population was obese or overweight. The hometown of NASCAR legend Darrell Waltrip immediately decided it needed to make a U-turn on physical education.

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Child Left Behind doesn't measure physical education. There's not a single state that I know any part of No Child Left Behind that puts any emphasis on it.

"If we start giving some awards and recognition, then you'll see school systems working hard on physical education," he says.

"But that's not a driving force right now."

PE and test scores can coexist

According to the "Preventing Childhood Obesity" study issued by the Institute of Medicine in October, few schools are following the recommendation by the American Academy of Pediatrics and other health organizations that physical education classes be provided daily for all students.

The IOM is an independent organization that advises the federal government on health issues. It said daily PE exists nationwide at only 8% of elementary schools, 6.4% of middle schools and 5.8% of high schools. Illinois is the only state that mandates PE every day for every student, even there about 25% of the state's school districts have been given waivers that relax the requirement.

George Gilliam, a surgeon and the chairman of the Owensboro Public Schools Board, says improving test scores and providing quality physical education need not be separate endeavors.

"You can have both, you really can," Gilliam says. "I think our children are more physically fit than ever, and our test scores are better than they've even been."

One sign of that improved fitness is seen each morning behind Owensboro's Newton Park Elementary School.

On a grassy field that used to become swampy every winter, a quarter-mile asphalt walkway has been built with \$18,000 raised by the school's parent-teacher organization.

At 7:30 a.m. about 80 of the school's 325 students voluntarily walk, skip and run laps for an hour before school. Collectively this school year, they have amassed 5,500 miles, and on first-grader, Marcus Russell, 7, has logged a pack-leading 140 miles.

"As long as we can bear it, we come out," says PE teacher Sheila Daniel, who records the mileage, rain or shine.

But as proud as Owensboro is of the progress it has made in three years, there isn't an expectation that other communities will rush to emulate its PE programs and emphasis on community fitness.

A long-term investment

Advocates of New PE say resistance to the change comes most often from teachers who prefer team sports.

Noting that studies by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show childhood obesity has increased by about 30% since the 1980s, Schupbach asks, "What if we would have dumbed down America's children by 30% since the 1980s?"

"What I've seen in my 21 years as a PE teacher is that kids almost have gotten to a point where movement is perceived as work to them," Schupbach says. "And we have a society now where we're much more fearful of allowing a child to go out and play."

For schools that say they can't get funds for fitness centers, Schupbach points out he started his program in 1992 with a \$5,000 grant and has largely supported it since through traditional school fundraising events.

And while PE advocates sometimes tend to rail about a lack of support from the federal government, Washington does issue about \$69 million in Physical Education Program (PEP) grants a year.

Ron McPhee, president of Polar's HealthFirst division, says about 700 schools have started heart-rate monitor programs in the last three years and about 25% did so with PEP grants.

"We have helped write grants," says McPhee, whose company regularly holds three-day workshops where schools pay a \$1,500 fee but leave with about \$5,000 worth of equipment. For about \$12,000, McPhee says, a school district with 2,000 to 3,000 students can get the heart-rate monitors and software it needs to begin any of the New PE programs.

The push for daily PE

"I think it's going to take time, but look, something's got to change," McPhee says.

"If the statistics continue in the direction they're going, 75% of our youth will be obese. ... There's starting to be a lot more linkage with PE being the solution to the problem."

Two members of the Institute of Medicine committee that wrote the "Preventing Childhood Obesity" study agree.

"I think the best thing schools could do is at least put 30 minutes of activity back into the school day," says Ross C. Brownson, a professor at the Saint Louis University School of Public Health. "Then I think schools need to develop a consistent message about the food and snacks that are available in school."

Brownson also agrees that if childhood obesity isn't stemmed, today's youth will risk having a lower life expectancy than their parents.

Citing a CDC study that says the obesity epidemic will lead to one of every three children born in 2000 or later developing Type 2, non-hereditary diabetes, Brownson says, "Then we likely will see a decline in overall life expectancy. ... Can I say absolutely? No. But there's definitely a risk to it."

Russell Pate, a professor in the Department of Exercise Science at the University of South Carolina, says if PE were offered on a daily basis and students were active for at least 30 minutes, "at least we would be making a dent."

But he adds, "The predicament we have is that we're so far from making that happen."

After school and health officials consulted with the Naperville, Ill., school district, whose advances in physical education were noted in the movie *SuperSize Me*, Owensboro adopted the Fit for Life program that aims to teach students how to create their own fitness plans.

A partnership between the city's hospitals and schools provided nearly \$750,000 to equip extensive fitness centers at 11 schools. Teachers were trained on "New PE" techniques that stress keeping an entire class active for 30 to 60 minutes on treadmills, stationary bikes, rowing machines and weightlifting stations.

Owensboro's superintendent for public schools, Larry Vick, addresses his city's reversal with candor that suggests if Owensboro can do it, so can everyone else.

'Definitely not very affluent'

"We're not Aspen; we're a barbecue community," Vick says. "We definitely are not very affluent. We have housing projects, and we have various shelters in our district."

Adds Vick: "We're not coming at this from an enlightenment standpoint, but from necessity. We had a high percentage of kids headed for diabetes. It doesn't do a kid any good to be a valedictorian if he's going to be dead at 30 from a heart attack."

'No accountability'

What if your children brought home report cards that said they were flunking fitness? What if you checked your local school's ratings and found out its physical education programs scored below the national average?

At a time when standardized tests are heavily influencing attitudes about education, many physical educational experts say getting PE "on the scoreboard" could be a key to getting parents to take the epidemic of childhood obesity more seriously.

"I am in favor of doing a better job with providing parents with the weight status and physical activity status of their children," says Russell Pate, a University of South Carolina professor of exercise science who helped write the Institute of Medicine's "Preventing Childhood Obesity" study.

"We think parents ought to know this already, but they really don't."

South Carolina is developing a program to rate PE programs and students' physical fitness, and its director says there was an immediate reaction from schools that tested low in preliminary results.

"We had a lot of administrators who called teachers in and said, 'What's going on here?'" says Judith Rink, a PE professor at South Carolina.

"We've recognized that we have to be a player. You've got to get people's attention. Right now there's no accountability, and without that we're just blowing in the wind."

Deb Wolf, a PE professor at Eastern Illinois University and former president of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, says a standardized national test for fitness could bring a new emphasis on PE.

"We would absolutely love to have mandated tests, to supply data," she says. "I think we could see throughout the entire country where there are pockets of problems."

—By Tom Weir

Physically fit schools

The National Association for Sports and Physical Education (NASPE) named 12 schools this year as having outstanding physical education programs. They are:

\$372,000 contribution to build the school fitness centers isn't likely to be duplicated elsewhere because, typically, "97% of health care dollars are spent on treating disease and only 3% on wellness and prevention."

Her hospital's contribution, Neel says, stemmed from a mission statement that prevention is as important as treatment.

"There's no money in that business," Neel says. "If you have no money, there's no mission. Until the (health care) reimbursement system changes, I don't envision a lot of organizations moving in our direction. We are fortunate to be part of a health care system that's very dedicated to prevention."

Adds Neel: "It's a long-term investment. It's not going to pay off in just a year. It may be a generation."

So, in an era when test scores in reading, math and science have become the driving force in education, how do PE advocates gain a bigger voice in deciding schooling priorities?

Data, says Rick Schupbach, an innovative PE teacher at Grundy Center (Iowa) Elementary School.

"What has happened in physical education is that we don't have any data to back up our programs," Schupbach says.

"How do we validate what we're doing? If I go before the school board and say my kids are fit, the response is going to be, 'Show me the data to back that up.'"

Using a computer program created by heart-rate monitor maker Polar, Schupbach says he can track how much time students spend in the school's fitness center getting their heart rates into the ideal target zone.

"I can have heart monitors on those students all day long, all week long," Schupbach says. "At the end of the week I can simply download that information. It will actually jump into their report cards immediately."

Schupbach also has partnered with the University of Northern Iowa School of Health, Physical Education and Leisure Services and Polar to put seven graduate students on his PE staff to get teaching experience and do research to show his program is working.

'Every kid can succeed'

"We think this is the wave of the future, the direction that physical education needs to go in," says Chris Edgington, dean of Northern Iowa's Health, Physical Education and Leisure Services department.

"It's absolutely amazing to see how much self-directed activity these students are involved in. They're getting their heart rates up, and they don't have to run a four-minute mile to do it. Every kid can succeed. That's the beauty of that program. Most physical education programs, there are kids off on the side, not doing anything."

As with all New PE programs, personal improvement is the goal, and students aren't rated against others for strength, stamina or speed.

The program embraces aerobic activities such as jogging, swimming and traversing obstacle courses that work out the entire body. It disdains old-school competitions such as dodgeball that tend to quickly relegate slow-moving students to the sideline.

"We've come through several generations now where we've been removing the requirement for physical activity in our lives. To be honest, I think it's going to take a long time for us to turn this ship around."

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