

Madison's focus still the students

'Icon,' longtime former teacher helps celebrate school's 30th anniversary

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Madison Junior High School commemorated its 30th anniversary Monday with a celebration that often focused on the lifetime achievements of Phil Lawler.

Lawler is a member of the original Madison faculty, a retired District 203 physical education coordinator and the director of education and training for PE4life, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the development of quality, daily physical education programs for all children.



Madison Junior High celebrated its 30th anniversary Monday afternoon by recognizing the lifetime achievements of retired District 203 physical education coordinator Phil Lawler. Here Lawler hugs Executive Director of PE4life Anne Flannery after she spoke in Lawler's honor during the event.

Danielle Gardner / Staff photographer

During the ceremony, the school and Naperville School District 203 recognized Lawler as "The Idea Man" and as "An Icon of a Community Contributor."

While teaching at Madison, Lawler pioneered a new approach to physical education instruction. He led District 203 to change the focus of its PE programs from teaching sports skills to getting every child in school physically fit.

This transition began about nine years ago with the surprising lessons he learned from heart monitors. Those lessons led Lawler to a philosophy on teaching PE that stresses constant movement and melds fun and fitness. Lawler's passion for this approach gained great support in the District 203 community, which stepped up to transform PE facilities at Madison and other District 203 schools into what amounted to full-fledged fitness centers.

The PE program at Madison became a model for this new approach, and PE4life, which Lawler began working for once he retired from teaching, has sent thousands of educators from 38 states and 10 countries to Madison to see how District 203 has modernized its gym classes.

Anne Flannery, PE4life's executive director, said the ever-growing interest in this approach to PE all started with Lawler.

"For any of you who don't believe in the power of one, believe in it," she said.

After he received two standing ovations from the jam-packed gymnasium, Lawler, who is currently fighting his fourth round of cancer, stepped to the podium.

Directing his comments to the students who, he noted, weren't attending Madison when he retired three years ago, Lawler stressed that the assembly was about the school, not him.

He pointed out to them that the American flag to which they pledged allegiance actually flew over the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., on the birthday of the school's namesake -- President James Madison. He also noted that the school opened late, and did so in part because wind blew down the wall upon which Madison's beloved mural is painted. He noted that the artist who painted it is color blind.

The building itself has seen two additions since it was built, and District 203 split Madison's original construction costs with the state, which installed "an experimental roof" in the building, Lawler said. The roof was supposed to expand and contract in certain types of weather, he noted, and it did.

"We went through two years where you could actually see the sky through the roof of the gymnasium and the cafeteria," Lawler said. "We actually had basketball games called off due to rain."

However, moments before he led the students in a "M-A-D-I-S-O-N" cheer, he reminded them what has mattered most at Madison over the past 30 years.

"I watched this building go up brick by brick," he said, "but the reality is that it has always been about the students."