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## In Some PE Classes, Counting Small Steps To Achieve Fitness

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Thirty students file into the gym of [Montgomery County](#)'s largest elementary school. Each grabs a pedometer, and, to the strains of "Cotton-Eye Joe," starts to jump and stretch, twist and balance, roll and crab walk.

For almost an hour, teacher Cindy Lins keeps them moving. Then the pedometers are checked, and the energy output assessed. Fourteen students have gone as far as a half-mile. Many are breathing harder than when they came in, rating a "moderate."

The fitness class at Spark M. Matsunaga Elementary School in Germantown is an innovation, although it might not look like it.

As schools are thwarted by mandates and lack of money in their efforts to offer more physical education, they are trying to offer better physical education. At Matsunaga, the focus is on fitness, not competitive sports. Students are taught that aerobic activity helps physically and mentally. "It helps get rid of our excess energy and makes it easier to focus in class," said Jonathon Bateky, 11.

The class takes place once a week, and health experts say that explains a key problem with school physical education programs -- not enough time is spent in them to do any real good.

"To truly have an impact in skill development, you need a minimum of three times a week," Lins said.

The most important strategy for combating obesity is increasing physical activity, according to a [Government Accountability Office](#) report. And health experts say it's time for schools to play a bigger role.

About 4 percent of elementary schools, 8 percent of middle schools and 2 percent of high schools provide daily physical education, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Twenty-two percent do not require students to take any phys-ed class.

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that schools provide at least 150 minutes of exercise per five-day school week at the elementary school level and 225 minutes a week for middle and high school students. The reality: Public elementary schools nationwide offer 85 minutes a week for first-graders and 98 minutes a week for sixth-graders, according to a 2005 report by the National Center for Education Statistics.

A few lawmakers want physical education requirements mandated under No Child Left Behind, the very law some educators blame for cutbacks in structured gym classes. As schools increased instructional time for core classes, the role of physical education diminished.

But the reauthorization of the No Child law appears stalled. In Maryland, a bill has been introduced mandating 90 minutes of physical education and 60 minutes of other physical activity each week in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. Virginia's legislature approved a bill recommending the same.

"Forty minutes a day, five days a week can make a big difference in the health of children," said Daniel W. Jones, president of the [American Heart Association](#). "That can be accomplished in the school setting."

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Legislating exercise has not been easy, however. In Maryland, such bills have been defeated in each of the past four years in large part because state education officials object to mandated time in any subject. The recommendation that Virginia's legislature just passed started out as a mandate for physical education but was changed. No one wants to be accused of micromanaging the school day. And there is still no physical education requirement in the pending reauthorization of the No Child law.

Some school systems, hampered in their efforts to increase the quantity of phys-ed classes, have turned to improving quality.

The focus on competitive sports "left out a lot of kids, who stood on the sidelines and watched," said Terri McCauley, supervisor of health and physical education for Montgomery County Public Schools.

The situation began to change in the 1990s with the standards movement in education, which allows school systems to set content and performance standards for teachers to meet, and new revelations about the effect of exercise on the body and brain. Some educators decided that it was time to change the focus of physical education to health and to ensure that teachers were properly trained.

"It is very important that people not think that we can substitute physical activity for physical education," said McCauley, adding that there is a difference between recess and carefully designed exercise. "They are not the same things," she said.

Today there are programs built around standards set by states and school systems. In Maryland, six physical education standards were approved in 2006: exercise physiology, biomechanics, social-psychological principles, motor learning, physical activity and skillfulness.

So instead of awkwardly waiting to be picked -- or not -- for a team, students at Matsunaga are guided by individualized programs and goals. Instead of climbing a rope while the whole class watches, they are graded privately.

Students are taught health-related fitness skills so they understand the importance of cardiovascular fitness, flexibility, muscular endurance, strength and body composition, McCauley said. The elementary school focus is on developmental stages and movement; in middle school, on tactical games, problem-solving and decision-making; in high school, on the principles of physical education.

The most advanced school programs, such as PE4Life in Naperville, Ill., promote daily physical education.

Students who voluntarily exercised before a literacy class improved reading and comprehension scores by 1.4 years on a grade-level equivalence test, Pe4Life President Anne Flannery said. And at an elementary school in Kansas City, Mo., where PE4Life is based, disciplinary incidents dropped 67 percent, Flannery said.

There are no PE4Life programs in the Washington area, but McCauley is in her third year of a \$1.1 million Physical Education Program grant, which the company helped persuade Congress to establish in December 2000 to start or improve programs geared toward fitness.

McCauley used her grant to buy FITNESSGRAM, a software that allows teachers to assess and keep track of key fitness markers -- aerobic capacity, body composition, muscle strength, endurance and flexibility.

[Fairfax County](#) is also developing a version of FITNESSGRAM.

At a training session in Montgomery for physical education teachers this year, McCauley told them that assessments must be conducted in a safe environment, in which nobody feels awkward.

An instructor asked the teachers: "Are we going to run all the obese kids at the same time?"

No one answered. The correct answer, the instructor said, was "no."

At [John Carroll Elementary](#) in Landover and Maury Elementary in Alexandria, fourth- and fifth-graders are in their second year of the Mystics in Training program, which was started by [Washington Mystics](#) head coach [Tree Rollins](#). Students walk at least a mile each day with their teachers and learn about nutrition. Mystics players also walk once a month with the students as part of the program.

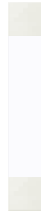
In the District, a nonprofit group started the Kids on Ice program a decade ago to provide free figure skating, hockey and speed skating lessons to economically disadvantaged children. More than 51 public and private schools and after-school care groups participated last year.

Sometimes schools find the right path by accident. Elizabeth Payne, health and physical education coordinator for Fairfax County Public Schools, said that when Woodson High School in Fairfax was under renovation, students were sent to a recreation center, where they were unable to participate in competitive sports. Instead, fitness became the focus. When teachers saw that students were becoming more physically active, they stuck with the fitness education.

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