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## **In PE, Dodgeball Is Out. Zumba Is In.**

*By Michael Alison Chandler*

The cavernous gymnasium at Patriot High School can be intimidating for 15-year-old Kristin Ansah. When students break out the hockey sticks before gym class, she ducks for cover.

"I don't work out," she said. "I don't play sports."

But Kristin looks forward to her physical education classes, because her teachers let her choose what she wants to play. During the first unit, she bypassed football and tennis for jump-rope games with her friends. "It reminded me of my childhood," she said.

The program at the Prince William County school is part of a national effort to mobilize a generation that has been labeled the most sedentary in the nation's history. It represents a major shift in physical education to reverse the trend of inertia, with gym teachers working harder to make sure that their classes don't appeal just to the most athletic students while the rest of the kids in school-issued shorts are left sitting on the sidelines.

"The country depends on us to do something different than what we have been doing," said Dolly Lambdin, president of the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE). "We cared too much about who is the best, who can do the most push-ups, and not nearly enough about what it means to be healthy and physically active for a lifetime."

"The New PE," as it's often called, is a nicer PE.

Out are dodgeball and other sports that use kids as targets, contests that reward students who are the strongest, and exercise doled out (or withheld) as a form of punishment: Still talking? Four more laps!

In are personal fitness plans, target heart-rate zones, and sports that play to different strengths and introduce students to activities that they can pursue across a lifetime. "Physically literate" and "lifelong movers" are buzzwords of the New PE.

Nearly one of every three U.S. children is overweight or obese, a rate that has tripled in the past three decades. Students are less likely to walk to school or play outside before dinner, and they are more likely to spend hours in front of a television or computer screen. Many advocates see physical education, with its potential to reach 56 million students, as a key way to influence behavior during and after the school day.

The D.C. public school system received a federal grant to introduce students to more "life-time physical activities," said Heather Holaday, the health and physical education program manager for the District.

Archery is one of many sports, including rock climbing, fly fishing and yoga, that District schools are now offering as they try to up the activity level of a wider range of students. Archery--popularized in the "Hunger Games" movies--has egalitarian appeal, Holaday said.

"You could be standing next to the most athletic person in your class and have a chance to be successful," she said.

Some of Miesha Thompson's physical education students at Roosevelt Senior High School were skeptical as they went through an 11-step introduction to archery one day this spring.

"Bows and arrows?" asked freshman Karlos Kinney, eyebrows raised. Thirty minutes later, any grumbling was drowned out by the sound of whap! whap!, followed by cheers and "I got it in the red!"

The school district is also investing in technology, including heart monitors, that teach students how their bodies respond to exercise and give them a picture of how hard they are working. The monitors also help teachers evaluate students based on effort rather than on how fast they are moving.

School districts across the country are adopting different approaches to introducing lasting exercise habits to more students.

In Prince George's County, high school students take "Your Personal Fitness," a required class during which they create individual plans with activities they can pursue outside of school, such as Zumba or walking around the neighborhood.

And a Fairfax County program is outfitting students with pedometers so they can analyze how much exercise they are getting during their daily lives.

Professional associations for physical educators have spent 20 years trying to make the curriculum more accessible through academic standards and teacher training.

First lady Michelle Obama gave the effort a big boost in recent years with her campaign to get kids moving. Last year, she launched a schools-based program to increase physical activity throughout the school day with a goal of 60 minutes of exercise per day, the amount recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. An Institute of Medicine report estimates that at least half of students fall short of that amount. Walking or biking to school, recess, intramural sports, classroom breaks and physical education are all part of the push.

### **Competing for Attention**

The efforts come as physical education programs struggle for time and resources, overshadowed by growing academic demands. In a 2007 survey of school administrators, 44 percent reported cutting time from physical education and recess, as well as other subjects, to increase reading and math instruction following the passage of the No Child Left Behind law.

Advocates point to growing evidence that shows a connection between exercise and academic performance. But most state and local regulations are weak when it comes to what federal law considers a nonessential subject.

Just six states require elementary schools to provide at least 150 minutes of physical education a week, as recommended by the physical educators' association. Just two states require middle or high schools to offer the recommended 225 minutes weekly, according to a state survey by researchers at the Bridging the Gap Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The 2010 Healthy Schools Act in the District requires elementary and middle schools to meet these standards by next school year. Virginia and Maryland laws have no time limits.

Time spent in physical education tends to drop off in high school. Most states, including Virginia and the District, require only one or two years of physical education in high school to graduate. Maryland requires one semester.

At the same time, the era of testing and accountability is helping to shape physical education. The New PE has an official test that yields reams of data used to evaluate programs, mold instruction and help students set fitness goals.

The Presidential Physical Fitness Test, a mainstay of gym classes for decades, was officially retired last school year, based on the recommendation of a childhood obesity task force convened by the president. The contest rewarded students and schools if they scored in the 85th percentile or higher in such categories as curl-ups, push-ups and the mile-long endurance run.

The new president-sponsored test, the Fitnessgram, evaluates students according to their personal progress and research-based targets of optimal healthy fitness levels for each age and gender. Many school districts in the Washington area years ago switched to the new test, which was originally designed in 1982. The categories are similar, though there is a trend away from the mile run.

With the mile, the kids who are the least fit are the last to finish, said Cheryl Richardson, senior director of member engagement and programming for SHAPE. The more popular test now is a goal-based, back-and-forth shuttle run across the gym, and the kids who are the most fit tend to run more times--and be the last to finish. "It changes the tone from a hurry-up-and-finish to a how-long-can-you-go?"

Some people are wary of the changes in physical education, worrying that the cultural shift could soften the nation's children.

"It's becoming too politically correct," said Dennis Senibaldi, a school board member in Windham, N.H., who advocated against a policy in his district to ban dodgeball last year.

"We want to teach kids you don't always get first place, you don't always get a trophy. . . . My son didn't make the seventh-grade soccer team. Should we get rid of the soccer program because not everyone made it?"

### **'As Many As You Can'**

Even though the new tests are geared to be less competitive, many students still dread them.

"Just exempt me now. I can't do it," Kristin Ansah told her teacher at Patriot High School in Bristow, Va., on the spring morning she had to take her push-up test. At the beginning of the year, she completed five push-ups before collapsing.

Kristin used to live in Staten Island, where she would walk to the store or the bus stop, but since moving to the Northern Virginia suburbs two years ago, gym class is often the only exercise she gets.

When her teacher, Charles Porterfield, showed no mercy, she reluctantly lined up with the other girls against the wall.

"Backs nice and flat. Down 90 degrees," Porterfield prompted. "Think about the number you got last time and try a little harder this time."

A recording turned on. "Ready? Begin," the voice droned. "Down, up one. Down, up two. Down, up three."

"Do as many as you can, literally till your arms are shaking and you can't do any more," Porterfield said.

Kristin made it past five, then six, then seven, before finally stopping at eight.

A regional soccer star in her class kept going long after everyone else had let out a last groan, surpassing 60 push-ups.

But Kristin was happy with her number.

"I improved," she said.

michael.chandler@washpost.com

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