

Students in Baton Rouge Elementary School Get a “Jump” Start on Learning

Issue: “May I have your attention please?” It’s a daily challenge familiar to all elementary educators: transitioning students from the social scene following morning drop-off to the desired state of “learning readiness” once they are seated in the classroom. Could a certain type of physical activity be the key that opens the door to a receptive mind?

Bonnie Richardson, an enthusiastic 34-year veteran physical education teacher at the Baton Rouge Foreign Language Academic Immersion Magnet (FLAIM) elementary school in Louisiana, is convinced it does.

Early on in her new position at FLAIM, Richardson observed that students were directed to go to the gym after morning drop-off and read a book, without having the chance to “get the wiggles out” or visit with their friends. “The teachers on morning duty were having a tough time dealing with the kids’ fussing,” she says. She approached Principal Cheryl Miller and asked if she could assume responsibility for that first half hour — even though it would add a half hour of voluntary time to her workday. Intrigued, the principal approved the request.

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, *Let’s Move!* Active Schools (now Active Schools) and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.



Before school, FLAIM students participate in choreographed dance movements specifically designed to get the blood flowing, work the large muscle groups, and engage the right and left sides of the brain.

The Big Idea: Richardson, a SHAPE America member, says her inspiration came from the action-based learning workshops and training by internationally known educational consultant Jean Blaydes Madigan, whose kinesthetic teaching strategies are based on brain research. Richardson used the techniques at her former teaching job to alleviate students’ mental fatigue during annual, four-hour achievement tests.

“I instituted periodic mini-breaks that involved ‘traversing the midline,’” she says, noting that the act of bringing your left elbow to your right knee and vice versa encourages the left and right hemispheres of the brain to communicate.

Madigan has linked these types of movements to enhanced learning. “Locomotor movement crosses the brain and body’s midlines to integrate and organize brain hemispheres,” she observed in [Building Better Brains through Movement](#), (Blaydes Madigan, 2009). “When students perform cross-lateral activities, blood flow is

increased in all parts of the brain, making it more alert and energized for learning.”

When schoolwide test scores rose a full point that first year and another four points by the third year, the administration was convinced that Richardson was on to something.

Implementation: With Richardson’s changes in place at FLAIM, students in grades K-5 now head directly to the gym when they arrive at school between 8-8:05 a.m. This gives them a chance to socialize with friends while circling the gym’s perimeter. After 10 or 15 minutes, Richardson instructs everyone to “Freeze!” and form two lines.

She then cranks up the volume on a fast-paced song, such as “Jump” by the Pointer Sisters, and two students take the stage to lead everyone in choreographed, up-and-down and cross-body dance moves specifically designed to get the blood flowing, work the large muscle groups, and engage the right and left sides of the brain. “Jump” is followed by a mellower song — perhaps



FLAIM used an \$18,000 grant from Project Fit America to purchase a mix of indoor and outdoor equipment.

the steel-drum beats of Jimmy Buffett’s “Banana Wind” — and slower movements that gradually decrease the heart rate. By the time students reach their classrooms and get seated at their desks, they are ready to settle down and their minds are cued to learning.

FLAIM students spend 60 percent of their day immersed in classes conducted in French, Spanish or Mandarin. Integrating this intensive language curriculum with the other required subjects leaves just two 30-minute periods each week for PE class. Determined to get the most out of this limited PE time, Richardson obtained an \$18,000 grant from the charitable organization Project Fit America, developed a fitness program, and used the money to purchase a mix of outdoor and indoor fitness equipment, including parallel and pull-up bars, horizontal ladders, sit-up stations, weighted hoops, and 1,000 stackable “cardio cups.” Fitness, though key, has been far from the only benefit.

“Our PE activities are designed to encourage TCC (teamwork, communication and

cooperation) while using both sides of the brain,” says Richardson, who was named Project Fit America’s 2015 Teacher of the Year for her program. Working in teams, students race “like crayfish or crabs,” backwards or sideways to collect and stack the cardio cups into towers. When the towers inevitably topple, she reinforces their accomplishments, not failures.

“Did you use your building blocks of fitness?” Richardson asks them. “Even though your tower collapsed, there was no error in what you did. You used cardio, upper-body muscles, coordination, and teamwork. You should feel very good about yourselves.”

Takeaway: To prepare the mind for absorbing information throughout the day, Richardson recommends beginning with several minutes of moderate cardio exercise, followed by vigorous cross-body movements. The teachers at FLAIM report dramatic positive results: Students are calmer now when they get to class, and are far more likely to sit down, focus on what’s

Program Team

Bonnie Richardson, PE Teacher & Louisiana AHPERD President

Cheryl Miller, Principal

Warren Drake, Superintendent

being taught, and participate with their full attention.

Results: It’s tricky to attribute higher test scores directly to increased physical activity and fitness, but last year FLAIM boasted the state’s highest test scores for English and the second-highest overall scores.

Monthly progress checks chart students’ significant gains in cardio, upper- and lower-body strength (collective arm strength improved 125 percent in just the first year), coordination, and flexibility — and corresponding social and learning benefits have been reported by classroom teachers, administrators and parents.

Building on her before-school and PE class accomplishments, Richardson launched an after-school running club that attracted 139 students in 2016. Assisted by a small group of parent volunteers, participants train for January and March marathons and chart their weekly mileage. “We used to give out popsicle sticks for each tenth of a mile, but now it’s computerized,” she says. “The students scan barcodes on an iPad so we can collect long-term data on all classes.” The student with the most laps receives the coveted “Golden Shoes” (a pair of gold spray-painted sneakers) at an annual ceremony.



SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:

- ✓ Demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns.
- ✓ Applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance.
- ✓ Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.
- ✓ Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.
- ✓ Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.

Additional Resources

Links to more information about this program can be found at shapeamerica.org/casestudies.



50 Million Strong by 2029 is SHAPE America’s commitment to put all children on the path to health and physical literacy through effective health and physical education programs.