

Chesterfield's Bellwood Elementary gets fit - Richmond Times-Dispatch: Education

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BY JEREMY SLAYTON Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Monday, March 4, 2013 12:00 am

Rachel Hoffman's third-graders, on a recent February afternoon, jumped from numbered square to numbered square with music from British pop group One Direction playing in the background.

Students weren't playing recess hopscotch, but participating in a multiplication exercise for math. As Hoffman called out the multipliers of the numeral three, students jumped to the appropriate square, yelling out the answer as they did so.

At one point, Hoffman told the students to stop and just dance along with the music before continuing with the math exercise. It was making math fun through movement, in this case using Geo Mats to combine learning through motion.

Physical activity in the classroom is not taboo at Bellwood Elementary School in Chesterfield County. In fact, it's openly encouraged as part of the school's wellness and fitness initiatives aimed at improving student and staff health.

Bellwood is the only school to pilot three school-based programs with Fit4Kids, a Richmond-based nonprofit organization that strives to improve kids' health through physical activity and healthy eating. Those efforts at Bellwood include wellness integration, recess coaching and learning gardens.

"Our programs are meant to complement the curriculum and not take any time away from the curriculum. Obviously, that has to be the school's focus," said Mary Dunne Stewart, executive director of Fit4Kids.

It's a partnership that has been embraced by the school community — from division Superintendent Marcus J. Newsome to school Principal Jennifer Rudd to the parents. There was some initial concern that some of the school's veteran teachers may have reservations about the new initiatives, but that was not the case, Rudd said.

Teachers are just as actively involved as the students. They train together for the Bellwood 5K and Fun Run to be held April 27. There is an excitement that has spread

through the school's hallways and is noticeable as teachers and students approach the coursework.

“It really has been such a great thing to see because the teachers are so excited about it and the kids are passionate about it,” said Carrie E. Coyner, who represents the Bermuda District, which includes Bellwood, on the School Board. “The kids will tell you ... what a difference it has made in their attention and how they feel. It has created a much more positive environment.”

Teachers are seeing a difference, not only in their students, but also in their own energy levels. Hoffman, who is several months pregnant and can't be as active in her classroom as past months, said the physical activity has been good for her teaching.

“It really helped me, as a teacher, to revitalize me throughout the day,” she said. “I don't feel like parts of my day are as stagnant as they could be if we didn't incorporate all of the different outlets we've been allowed to use.”

And it's more than just jumping around. Male and female students have formed running clubs and there are two stationary bikes in the school that enable students to read a book and ride at the same time or stability balls to sit on to work on posture and core muscles. Stewart said the activity is seen by the students as a reward, not a punishment.

The periodic physical activity can refresh the students if their attention span starts to wander. Educators can gauge when their students have been sitting in their seats for too long, and Rudd encourages them to take “brain breaks” to get away from their desks to do movement activities.

Lauren BeCraft, a third-grade teacher at Bellwood, begins each day with a three-minute morning workout, and her students want to do it every day.

“They are more ready to learn after we do that,” she said. “Once you've moved, you perk up a bit.”

Nellie Knight is in her first year as Bellwood's wellness integration specialist — the plan is to have her at the school for two years then move to another one — and works with teachers on incorporating physical activity and kinesthetic teaching strategies into the core curriculum.

According to Stewart, Knight taught 250 activity-based lessons totaling 5,668 minutes in the classroom through the first 106 days of the school year. Of those minutes, the kids were out of the seats moving for 4,745 of them.

The lessons the students learn are extending beyond the classroom walls and influencing their decisions away from the school. Fifth-graders Tumilya Barksdale and Anya Bender try to maintain a healthy lifestyle with their families.

Sometimes they'll ride their bikes with siblings, run a mile, do push-ups or go on a hike. During recess, Tumilya and Anya said, some students used to just sit around and talk or want to play around on the Internet.

"They need to realize exercising is not just what you want to do, it's what you have to do because we don't want to have any obese kids," Tumilya said.

But the focus at Bellwood isn't just on being active. Nutrition is equally as important.

The school is one of four schools in the region in partnership with Fit4Kids that have learning gardens on campus — Elizabeth Scott Elementary and Evergreen Elementary in Chesterfield and Lakeside Elementary in Henrico County are the others — that students use for educational and nutritional purposes.

Fit4Kids also has partnerships for some programming at Woodville and Oak Grove elementary schools and the private St. Andrews School in the city of Richmond.

Students, with assistance from the teachers, grow vegetables such as arugula, broccoli and Swiss chard in the Bellwood learning garden. Other times at the school, healthy snacks are brought in for the students to try new foods. It was during one of these snack periods that Anya discovered star fruit — her favorite — and zucchini.

"I never tried it before," Anya said of the star fruit. "It was a new experience for me, and I found out I liked it."

Bellwood is a Title I elementary school where 80 percent of the student body qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch, and 36 percent of the student population has a first language other than English.

It is also one of the highest-scoring schools in the county based on student achievement on Standards of Learning assessments. The three-year average student pass rates are 90 or above in English, math, science and history.

How these healthy initiatives will affect student achievement remains to be seen, but there is a correlation between physical health and wellness and success in school, said Amy Bartilotti, the Community In Schools coordinator at Bellwood.

Confidence abounds that there will be improvements in academic and physical health. The school's efforts were lauded by one local organization that promotes an active Richmond region. Richmond Sports Backers last month honored Bellwood as the 2013 Outstanding School of the Year for its initiatives in wellness and fitness.

"The exciting thing about Bellwood is that it's really become a model program," said Jon Lugbill, executive director of Sports Backers. "I think we'll be able to see, over the course of multiple years, improvements in kids' test scores.

"I think we'll see improvements in their health. I think we'll see improvements in their energy and vitality during the day."

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