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How PE Looks in Boulder Schools

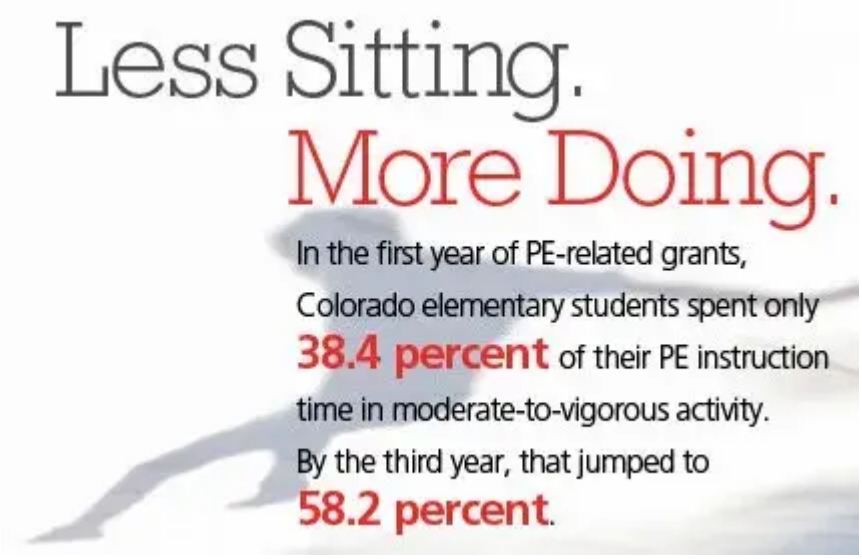
At Boulder's Fairview High School, gym class feels a lot like a trip to the rec center.

On a Wednesday morning last fall as PE class began, some students snapped up colorful pinnies so they could join the indoor soccer game. Others hustled downstairs to the school's weight room or to a converted racquetball court filled with spin bikes. Still others filed into the wrestling room where Zumba lessons were about to begin.

Students were free to choose where and how they would complete the day's workout. The class, called "PE by Choice," represents Fairview's attempt to remake its physical education program around fitness and personal effort. It's also one example of how the state's high school PE standards, which emphasize lifelong activity and individual goal setting, translate into daily practice.

Aside from one dance-focused PE offering at Fairview, gone are the days where all students focused on one sport as a group. The new approach offers a choice of up to 10 activities each week, ranging from sand volleyball to yoga. It also requires fitness testing three times a semester and the use of heart rate monitors up to four days a week.

Getting teens to take ownership of their PE sounds great on its face, but there are valid questions about whether the choice model can work in smaller or less affluent districts where PE staff and facilities are limited. There's also concern in some quarters that ongoing skills instruction is absent in the model, and the emphasis on effort and participation won't ensure mastery of all PE standards.



At first, even some students resisted the new PE program, said Rob Vandepol, a Fairview PE and health teacher who helped spearhead the effort.

“We had a bunch of kids who were like, ‘No, it’s going to be too hard.’ … They [were] just not really understanding what the program is about,” he said. “It’s about individual improvement and doing things that you enjoy.”

Ninth-grader Odali Arvalo, one of the few girls who chose soccer last fall, said she likes the variety.

“Sometimes you do get bored of always having to do the same thing,” she said. “Not every sport suits you. So you need to find something that does.

For the PE staff, the new model entails some logistical challenges – at times requiring three teachers to supervise up to 120 students in four locations. During the class last fall, Vandepol split his time between the soccer game and the nearby cardio room, walking briskly from one to the other every five or 10 minutes.

“We have supervision issues,” he admitted. “At some point, you have to decide what is really good for kids. … I don’t want anything bad to happen, but I guess what I’m saying is, this is good for kids.”

Inspiration in Illinois

The push to revamp Fairview's PE program came from Principal Don Stensrud. He believed the school could move from good to great if there was increased emphasis on exercise as a way to prime the brain for learning. It was a key concept from the influential book "Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain," by Harvard psychiatry professor John Ratey.

That's what led Vandepol and other staff members to visit Naperville Central High School in 2012. The Illinois school had pioneered an intensive, choice-based PE curriculum and was featured prominently in Ratey's book. Based on what they learned in Naperville, Vandepol and his colleagues piloted "PE by Choice" in the spring of 2013 and implemented it schoolwide the next fall.

It works like this: Early in the semester, students are assigned a fitness level ranging from one to four based on scores from standard tests of cardio, endurance, strength and flexibility. Students in Group 1 are the fittest and are required to wear heart rate monitors once a week. Group 2 students wear them twice a week, and so on for Groups 3 and 4.

On the days students wear the monitors, the goal is to get at least 25 minutes in "the zone," which is a heart rate of at least 140 beats per minute. Achieving that goal on the number of days required by their fitness level accounts for 40 percent of students' grades.

For Kaelec Signorelli, a football player who had landed in Group 4, the format provides a refreshing sense of autonomy.

"You actually get to decide who you want to be," he said. "Are you going to be the big slacker who … doesn't get your heart rate up? Or you can be the athletic person who tries to actually do this stuff."

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> Odali Arvalo, ninth-grader, Boulder Fairview High School

Changing Attitudes Toward PE

One hoped-for benefit of Fairview's new approach to PE is that it will engage a wider swath of students, not just those who can score goals. As Vandepol watched the fast-paced indoor soccer game, he noted that not everyone finds ball sports a good fit.

Most of the kids in the cardio room, they would be the typical group that would suck together and try not to get hit by the ball in here," he said.

That's not to say that he doesn't want students to try new activities. In fact, "PE by Choice" encourages cross-training by awarding extra points if students try more than one activity category a week. Besides promoting different athletic skills, it's meant to build a repertoire that lends itself to lifelong activity.

As Vandepol pitched students on the long list of options available last fall, he said, "Sometime later in life, you might not be able to get to the weight room and get to the gym and play with all your buddies … but you might be able to get home from work at 6 o'clock at night and just go for a jog and you'll feel better."

It's a theme out of the high school section of the state PE standards.

“Overall, our PE program is going toward lifetime physical activities. … It really tends to gravitate away from the team sports,” said Sue Brittenham, a PE consultant for the Colorado Department of Education.

Time and Money

While “PE by Choice” seems to be catching on at Fairview, don’t expect to see it widely copied across Colorado just yet. Even Vandepol knows it’s a hard sell.

“My hope is that it eventually will [spread]. But I know that change takes a really long time, especially in education.”

He said PE teachers at other district high schools have expressed interest in the concept. Some already offer a choice of activities but without the heart rate measurement. Meanwhile, at least one middle school in Jeffco Public Schools uses pedometers the same way Fairview uses heart rate monitors, but the choice component is absent.

At some schools, the price of the technology may be an obstacle. Fairview spent about $12,000 on heart rate monitors as well as extra chest straps. Staffing limitations or liability concerns may also be sticking points.

“I know there are some high schools where there’s no way that could happen,” Brittenham said. “There’s no way you could have them not be directly supervised.”

Money and logistics aside, students like Mariano Kemp believe “PE by Choice” makes sense.

The freshman football player said, “It’s really how they should treat a PE class – to get the kids as fit as possible, to push you to the best [of your] ability.”

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