



*Patty Kestell, a physical education teacher at Thorson Elementary School in the Cedarburg School District, was named the 2013 National Elementary Physical Education Teacher of the Year by the National Association of Sport and Physical Education.*

# The new role of PHYSICAL EDUCATION

How physical education is improving student learning  
and building lifelong healthy habits

*Shelby Anderson*

**A**ccording to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and tripled in adolescents in the past 30 years. In 2010, more than one third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese.

“We need physical education now more than ever,” says Patty Kestell, a physical education teacher at Thorson Elementary School in the Cedarburg School District.

Keith Bakken, executive director of Wisconsin Health and Physical Education, says, more specifically, we need good physical education programs in Wisconsin.

“Physical education is an academic subject,” Bakken said. “It’s more than learning how to play volleyball.”

### ■ More than Dodgeball

Physical education has changed a lot since the days of dodgeball and rope climbing. Kestell, who was recognized as 2013 National Elementary School Physical Education Teacher of the

Year by the National Association of Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), uses video analysis, modifies activities so students of all abilities can fully participate, and maintains a website for her students and parents.

“Physical education has made amazing leaps and bounds — it isn’t the gym class that past generations have known,” Kestell says.

Physical education today, Kestell says, is about getting all students (and even their families) active and involved, incorporating a mix of team sports and individual activities,

and putting an emphasis on the education aspect of physical education.

Kestell says that in her classes, she engages students in a variety of activities, designed so that all students can participate on an even playing field. Activities like snowshoeing are a fun way to get all students involved and introduce them to perhaps a new activity that they can do by themselves or with friends and family.

Even when her class covers a team sport like basketball, Kestell says, aspects of the game like the size of the ball or height of the hoop can be changed so that students at different abilities can play.

“I do whatever I can to modify my lessons so that everyone can be successful,” she says. “I try to make it fun for everybody and ensure that learning occurs for all of my students.”

The technology side of physical education has also reshaped and

enhanced the subject. For instance, Kestell uses video analysis – taping her students do an activity to help them improve. Kestell says the technology adds an element of fun to the class while also providing positive benefits for her students.

### ■ Emphasis on Education

Kestell and other experts interviewed for this article all emphasized that a core component of physical education today is education. Bakken said good physical education teachers like Kestell or Jack Prehn, a teacher in the Mount Horeb Area School District, emphasize learning as well as physical activity.

Bakken says Prehn tells the students what they’re going to learn and then holds an activity that reinforces the lesson. For example, before jumping rope, Prehn goes over the different parts of the heart and how an activity like jumping

rope can make the heart stronger.

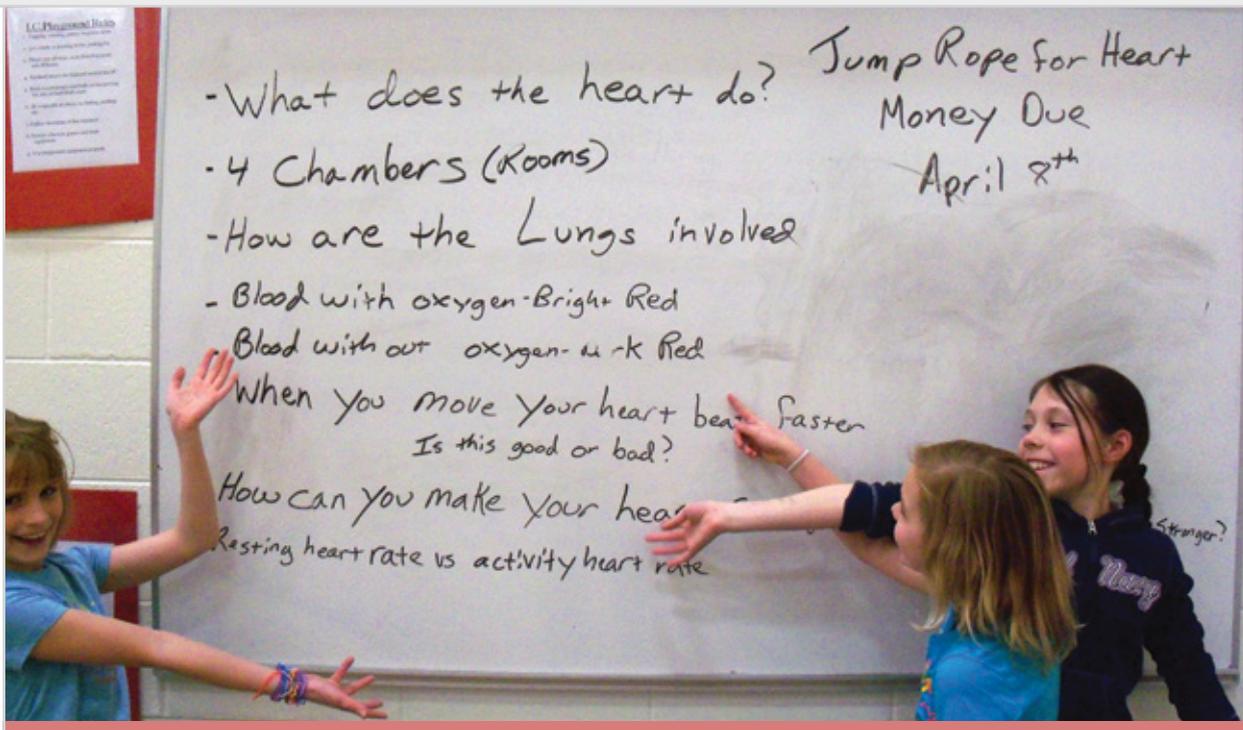
Kestell says there isn’t a day that goes by when she doesn’t use her iPad in one of her classes to do a quick presentation or look something up to supplement the physical activity. In her physical education classes, the learning takes place alongside the physical activity. For instance, if they run, Kestell teaches her students about resting heart rate or how running strengthens the heart.

“Our physical education program utilizes common standards-based assessments and rubrics in every unit,” Kestell said. “Students are aware of the standards and understand what the requirements are to achieve the different skill or cognitive levels of the rubric.”

The Wisconsin Standards for Physical Education lay out specific learning priorities and physical activity goals for each grade level.

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— Patty Kestell



According to Bakken and Jon Hisgen, a health education consultant at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), there are different goals for different age groups. For elementary school students, the main goal is to get all students engaged in regular physical activity in a fun way. In middle school, the physical activities and classes should still be centered on engaging all students in fun physical activities but also starting to get the students to learn some skills. In high school, the goal is to have each student have a physical activity or activities that they enjoy and can do for the rest of their lives.

Bakken says an ideal high school physical education class would quickly cover as many different activities and games as possible in hopes that students find one of those activities fun and something they want to continue doing outside of school.

“We’re hopeful that something will click and it will be an activity that they can do and enjoy for the rest of their lives,” Bakken said.

### ■ Lifetime Fitness

Kestell, says a big aspect of physical education and getting students active is by reaching out and engaging their families.

A quick visit to Kestell’s website shows a selection of activities and events aimed at getting families as well as students active.

In February, Kestell held a Family Wellness Night that had numerous stations set-up where families could do activities such as Zumba, yoga, mini-golf, gymnastics, and tae kwon do. The event also featured healthy snacks and brought in local wellness professionals so attendees could learn about health and wellness in their community.

Another popular event was a family snowshoe event in which 100 people walked a candlelight course through the school’s nature center.

“I value family wellness,” Kestell said. “A huge component of getting kids active is getting the family involved.”

Other activities include a bike

safety unit where, with the help of parent volunteers, Kestell was able to get her students on bikes and teach them bike safety rules. Kestell also formed a running club, which had about 55 students going on runs and participating in a 5K run at the end of the school year.

Kestell also has students track their physical activity outside of the classroom. She provides students with calendars that have suggestions for activities — many of which try to get family members and friends involved.

“One of our goals is to create a program that is not just about team sports,” Kestell said “The goal is to get all kids active and involved.”

### ■ What the Research Says

Brain research related to exercise is uncovering new findings each year. Up to a couple years ago, it was thought that humans were born with the maximum number of neurons that we were ever going to have. A study published in June by Kristy Spalding, a biologist at the

## ➔ BRAIN BREAKS: Using physical activity to aid learning

In today’s classroom, many schools are using brain breaks to get students moving and their brains primed for learning.

Brain breaks are quick one to two minute activities designed to get students to move their bodies and stimulate their brains. There are an endless number of activities. One simple activity is “Pick a Color.” A teacher says a color and students go around the classroom and touch five things of the color (can’t be another person). Another activity is jumping rock, paper, scissors. Students get into pairs, jump up and down five times, turn on the sixth jump and show rock, paper, or scissors.

Brain breaks have been found to be effective. Having students sit in a classroom for extended periods of time can be detrimental to learning. After only about 17 minutes of sitting, blood begins to leave the brain, which signals the release of melatonin. Exercise, even just a short activity, fuels the brain with oxygen and triggers the release of neurotransmitters, which enhance growth, impact mood, cement memory, and enhance connections between neurons.

Jo Bailey, president of Wisconsin Health and Physical Education, has been a big advocate of brain breaks. “In my mind, movement and learning are intricately connected with both having huge impact on each other.” □



## Additional Resources

### The *FOCUS*, “Promoting Healthy Eating and Physical Activity,”

October 2003, contact the WASB for a copy

Wisconsin Health and Physical Education — [www.whpe.us](http://www.whpe.us)

Department of Public Instruction Physical Education and Physical Activity —

[sppw.dpi.wi.gov/sppw\\_physicaled](http://sppw.dpi.wi.gov/sppw_physicaled)



“Physical education educators teach students about bigger health concepts in addition to physical activity.”

— Keith Bakken

Karolinska Institute in Sweden, found that exercise can create new neurons in the hippocampus — the area of the brain associated with learning and memory.

However, to reap these benefits, exercise needs to be regular. The intellectual benefits of exercise can accumulate but they also quickly recede without regular exercise.

“We have over 200 studies that say active students learn better,” Hisgen said. “Physical activity is pretty important when it comes to learning.”

In addition to boosting learning, studies have found regular physical activity reduces stress and anxiety, increases energy levels, and, among other benefits, promotes better sleep — all conducive to improved learning.

### ■ Role of Physical Education

A state law passed in 2011 gives school districts the option to award physical education credits to qualifying student-athletes. The credits allow high school student athletes to skip physical education classes.

Bakken and other physical education advocates say this is a bad idea. “A soccer coach teaches a skill, such as how to dribble a soccer ball,” Bakken says. “Physical education educators teach students about bigger health concepts in addition to physical activity.”

“The concept of what did you learn in physical education is becoming really important,” Hisgen said. “We’re seeing more and better classes.”

In addition, schools are moving physical activity beyond the gym. When Hisgen talks with school leaders about physical education, he likes to point out that districts should be working on the “Core 4” of student wellness. This includes students walking or biking to school (or some kind of other before or after school activity), brain breaks during the school day, active minutes in physical education class greater than 50 percent, and an active recess.

The goal in the end is the same — to teach students to be active, healthy adults. As Bakken points out, if every American exercised three times a week, health insurance costs could be reduced by as much as half.

Still, with budget cuts, physical education and school wellness programs are frequently among the first programs to be reduced or eliminated. When asked why physical education is important in our schools, Bakken has a straight to the point response.

“The answer is because our kids need it.” ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

