

# THE NEW PHYS ED.

Dodgeball is passé; schools are teaching lifelong fitness. By Ron Schachter

It's not unusual for kids to bike or skateboard before school and then count down the minutes until they get to play video games after school. But what would you think of including skateboarding or Wii in the school day?

That's just what a growing number of physical education teachers are doing, in an attempt to make exercise more engaging—and lifelong—for elementary and middle school students. A new generation of P.E. classes is introducing youngsters to everything from step aerobics and yoga to inline skating and mountain biking.

Experts agree that these approaches to exercise provide an attractive alternative to team sports and stay with students long after they leave school. "The newer physical education, which you will see more and more of in schools, focuses on personal challenges rather than team competition," explains Stephen Cone, a professor of health and exercise science at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. "And it provides skills that students can take with them to have a healthy life."

The change from the traditional P.E. diet of dodgeball,



→ Yoga



# Skateboarding



volleyball, and jumping jacks is taking place as the fitness of today's youngsters, along with a looming obesity crisis, has become a central concern for educators and parents.

## Solo Sports

Craig Coleman, who teaches physical education at Hayes Elementary School in Fridley, Minnesota, is one educator who appreciates the changing landscape. "When I was in school, we played dodgeball, basketball, and soccer," he recalls. "I picked up skateboarding and ice skating outside of school."

While team activities are not about to become extinct at Hayes, Coleman is steer-

ing his classes in a different direction. "I'm trying to get away from team sports," he says. "When these kids get older, they're not likely to play team sports. I'm assuming they'll quit."

That won't be the case, Coleman figures, with the individual sports—inline skating, ice skating, and skateboarding, among them—that he's added to the curriculum. "Ninety-five percent of our kids have never touched a skateboard before," Coleman says. "But they've picked it up really well."

For the past three years, the school's third and fourth graders have donned protective helmets, as well as knee, wrist, and elbow pads, and hopped onto skateboards that have stickier wheels to grip the gym floor without causing any damage.

Coleman launched the program with a \$5,000 grant,

purchasing equipment and materials from Colorado-based Skate Pass, which offers a curriculum covering everything from learning how to fall to turning correctly and even hosts a certification program for teachers.

## P.E. on Wheels

Coleman's not the only teacher putting kids on a roll. At Benjamin Franklin Middle School in Teaneck, New Jersey, physical education teacher Carol Ann Chiesa introduced inline skating to her students 14 years ago. With a \$10,000 grant from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, Chiesa acquired 40 pairs of skates in different sizes and the requisite pads and helmets.

The school's 300 fifth and sixth graders skate during three-week P.E. units in the fall and between the more

conventional units Chiesa teaches. "I ask them, 'On a scale of one to ten, of all the things you do in gym, which do you like best?'" and the skating always gets a nine or ten," she says. "They're doing something to increase their aerobic capacity, and they don't even realize it. They're getting a great workout."

Even though inline skating is not as popular as it was when she started the program, Chiesa remains convinced that it has staying power. "It's a lifetime sport," she says. "They have the basics now, and as they get older, they won't be afraid to come back to it."

Just outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, meanwhile, physical education teacher Mark Gartner is fixed as much on the future as the present at Hampton Middle School. Three years ago, the school acquired 60 Trek 820

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## The New P.E.

that students should be able to take with them what they have learned in P.E. "We have a fitness center that—in my opinion—rivals what you would find in a local gym," Gartner says, adding that students can choose from weight machines, treadmills, exercise bikes, and stair climbers. They can also take aerobic dance classes.

Gartner offers a telling measure of the program's success. "In the past, if you didn't want to do P.E., you forgot your clothes," he observes. "We have almost a zero rate of that."

## Exercise on TV

While advanced gym equipment can be costly, some schools are finding less expensive ways to deliver lifelong physical education. At Alamo Elementary School in Otsego, Michigan, Kyle Uramkin's classes have taken the electronic route by making use of Wii Sports and Wii Fitness activities.

These interactive video games allow users to participate in sports by moving their arms, legs, and bodies in simulated tennis and bowling matches, aerobics sessions, and fitness courses. Uramkin usually sets up four or five stations featuring different sports, through which the 25 students in his physical education classes rotate. He projects the interactive programs for some activities—such as step aerobics—on a large screen in the gym for the entire class to follow.

The students get a workout, Uramkin notes, and something more. "Kids who might have been hesitating to participate or weren't giving

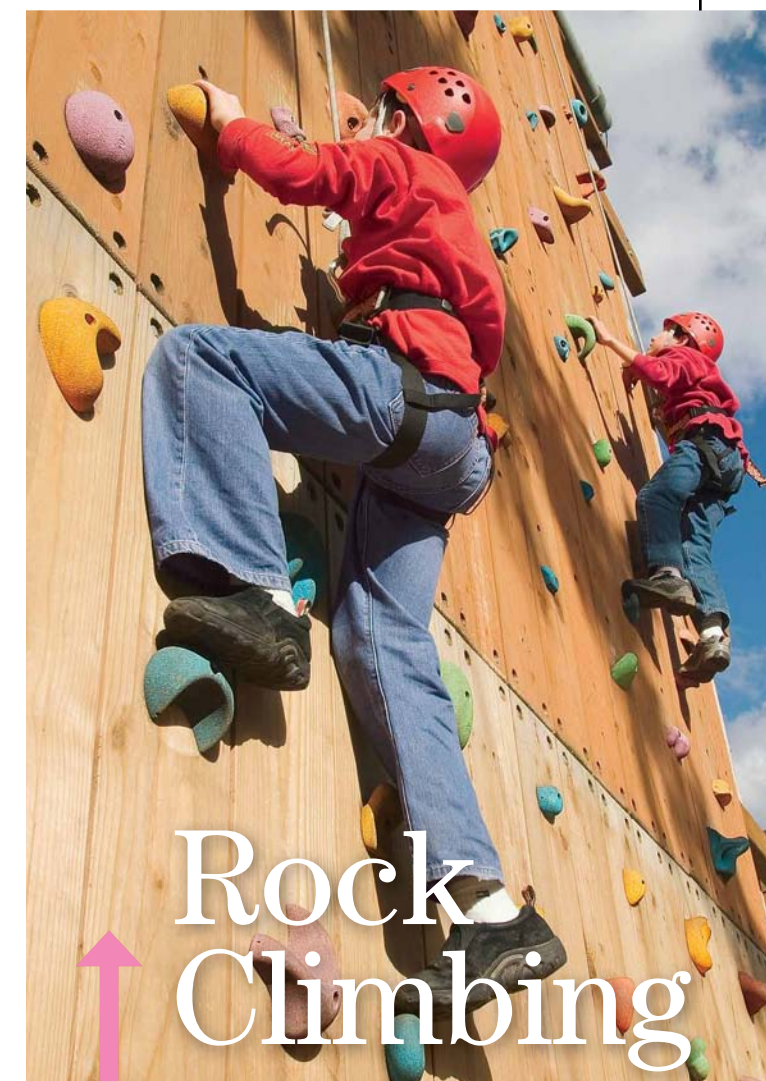
a hundred percent really take to it," he says, adding that the "exergaming" program has even reached students' homes. "I've had parents come in and say, 'We're thinking about getting one.' That's not just extending the physical activity of the kid, but who knows, maybe the parent will get more active."

## Stretch Breaks

There's also the growing conviction in some schools that physical activity belongs

in the classroom. At French Road Elementary School in Brighton, New York, most of the teachers lead their classes in yoga breaks throughout the day. Those teachers have received a three-hour, after-school training from a certified yoga instructor.

French Road assistant principal Carolyn Rabidoux, who introduced the yoga-in-the-classroom initiative three years ago, also provides materials from Indiana-based YogaKids International,



# Rock Climbing



# The New P.E.

including cards that show different yoga positions. “A teacher can pull out a pose to help children focus, get energy, or just relax,” explains Rabidoux, who has also created a series of online videos in which French Road teachers and their yoga instructor demonstrate those poses.

Some classrooms even have a yoga station, where individual students can

go over, consult a card, and assume a pose. “It gives them a positive way of focusing instead of yelling out or acting out,” Rabidoux says.

Fifth-grade French Road teacher Lara Liu says she uses yoga with her students regularly. “It energizes them after lunch and helps them focus before tests,” she says. “I also use it as a transition piece,

to get them on the same page and looking at me before we move on.”

That transition can be as simple as Liu calling out, “Give me a five.” In response, students raise their arms releasing one finger at a time as they take a long breath, and do the reverse as they breathe out. One of their favorites, Liu continues, is called the Volcano, in which they place their palms together at their chest, breathe in deeply, and then “explode” as they exhale, raising their hands over their heads then returning them to their sides.

## Good Results

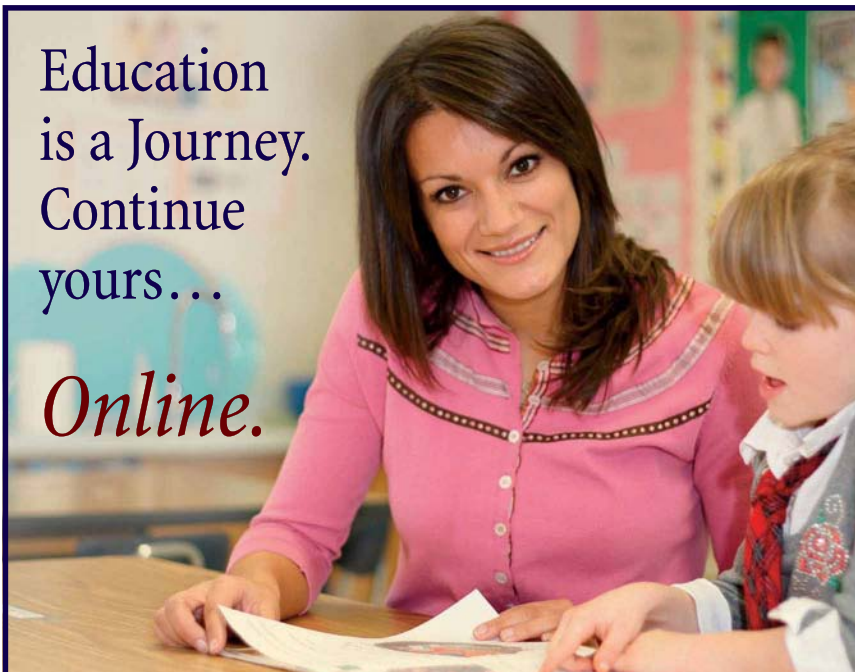
Educators who’ve taken advantage of the new P.E. are more than happy with the results. “Kids are really incorporating yoga into who they are,” says Rabidoux, who tells the story of one student recently stuck in an elevator during a visit to New York City. While the adults surrounding her were starting to panic, the youngster took some yoga breaths to calm herself down.

“More teachers are recognizing that students cannot sit for very long and are putting in short movement breaks,” adds Theresa Cone, an assistant professor of health and exercise science at Rowan University, who together with her husband, Stephen, has coauthored several books on new approaches to physical education. “I had one student teacher who convinced the entire school to stop every afternoon and do two minutes of exercise,” she recalls, explaining that the student teacher delivered instructions for simple movements over the school’s intercom. “The teachers and students loved it.”

Cone also insists that the same movements—such as twisting side to side, circling arms, reaching up and down, marching forward and backward—can be practiced in any classroom by students standing next to their desks. She also suggests having small groups of students take turns devising and leading a one-minute activity break every day. The results will be pleasantly surprising, she promises, “and they’ll be using the 21st-century skills of collaboration, problem solving, and creativity.” □

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