



WINTER 2007

# COMMUNITY

NEWSLETTER

## Kerr Physical Education ... Where Mind Meets Body

**K**indergartner Ryan Brett moves cautiously across a ladder with different colored rungs, singing out the colors as he goes. All the while, he is unknowingly coordinating auditory, visual, and kinesthetic senses that will serve the brain in word flow, pattern recognition, and problem solving. This Action Based Learning™ Lab, being used with kindergartners and first graders, targets young brains and is based upon research that supports the link of movement and physical activity to increased academic performance. The lab is being piloted at Kerr Elementary School and will be implemented in all four of the district's elementary schools by the 2007-2008 school year.

Fox Chapel Area is, "one of the most successful school districts in the nation to implement the Action Based Learning Lab and will be showcased as a success story on our Web site," says Jean Blaydes Madigan, a cofounder of the program and a longtime physical education teacher from Texas. The Action Based Learning Lab was developed by Mrs. Madigan and fellow physical education teacher Cindy Hess from Ephrata, Pennsylvania, eight years ago and has grown to become what is now known as Action Based Learning.

When Kerr physical education teacher Alex Slezak presented the idea of the program to district administrators this past fall, they endorsed it based on the fact that it provides the perfect integration of academics and exercise. Mr. Slezak, along with the other Fox Chapel Area elementary physical education teachers, spent a day training with a physical education teacher who implements the Action Based Learning Lab at a model PE4life school in Titusville, Pennsylvania. Armed with the concept that physical activity increases academic performance, they brought the learning lab to the Fox Chapel Area School District.

Visually stimulating, Kerr Elementary School's physical education scene is a jungle gym of colors and shapes, enticing students to "jump right in." Students in the kindergarten and first grade classes are directed to one of six stations designed to move the body in a brain-stimulating way. Today, approximately 40 kindergarten students sit cross-legged in two lines, eager for action. Meanwhile, the weather may be chilly outside, but the Kerr gym quickly



Kerr Elementary School kindergartners look through letter tiles to spell words corresponding with images on the gym wall.

heats up as the students move and listen to motivating music. Students spend two and a half minutes at each station before moving with their group to the next area, making the session fast-paced and invigorating.

While kindergartner Mercedes Weiss traces taped letters on the gym floor with a basketball, she comments that she's outlining what "looks like an M or a W." According to the Kerr physical education teachers, she is also encoding letter strokes and developing reading skills. Emily Ben scrambles over a gym mat covered in Scrabble-like letters, searching for those letters that make up the word "circle" before running across the gym to place her letters beneath the corresponding image. Moving from one taped "X" to another, Bryce Zacharias spins a scooter at each destination. At Christopher Gaston's favorite station, he follows his classmates through giant purple tubes and Kerr physical education teacher Jennifer Kane reinforces the pattern the students are to follow. Across the room, classmates balance along a rope and through hula hoops.

As they are balancing, coordinating, spinning, and bouncing, these students are also fully exercising their minds. Stations have progressed in difficulty throughout the year, according to the readiness of the students and their mastery of the skills. The lab requires students to be physically active throughout the period and provides a nice repetition of cognitive and physical skills. Says Mrs. Kane, "It gives younger students a routine to look forward to."

Periodically throughout the class, Mr. Slezak and Mrs. Kane will ask students for clarification on how a particular station works. Mrs. Kane questions, "What shape do I make if I want to balance my body?" In unison, kindergartners respond, "A T!!!" Asks Mr. Slezak, "How do we make the letter W?" An echoed "Slant down, slant up, slant down, slant up" is the class reply.

As the class comes to a close, the teacher team pulls the students back into their two lines at the doorway. While heart rates return to normal, Mr. Slezak quizzes them on forming letter shapes and identifying words, a final testimony to the integrated goal of the program: fitness for body and mind — the building blocks for lifelong health and education.



Kerr physical education teacher Alex Slezak helps a student begin to trace a letter on the gym floor with a bouncing ball.

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