

## PE classes in Erie region schools aim to lure kids into lifelong activity

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In his first time on cross-country skis, McDowell High School junior James Luba returned to Asbury Woods Nature Center to stow his varsity jacket inside.

Despite the 25-degree cold, he'd worked up a sweat and skied for a while without his coat.

"I play lacrosse and I've done some downhill skiing, but this is a lot different. It's really good exercise," Luba said.

Luba was part of a McDowell High School physical education class that went to Asbury Woods recently to learn how to snowshoe and ski.

The class is one of a growing number of physical education courses that emphasize activities that students can enjoy outside of school, and often for the rest of their lives.

They're part of a new focus on personal fitness to help kids be healthy and become healthy adults, said Maria Spicher, chairwoman of the Millcreek Township School District's health and physical education department.

"Physical education today is about teaching kids the skills they need to be more active, be more fit and be more healthy -- physically, emotionally and mentally. It's about teaching kids to have better lives," Spicher said.

### Fighting fat

Obesity is the major obstacle to student health and fitness, Spicher said.

Almost 17 percent of children and young adults ages 6 through 19 are obese -- or seriously overweight -- according to new studies printed Wednesday in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

And obesity has been linked to heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers.

Compounding the obesity problem are the computers, video games and TV that many children prefer to physical play, Spicher said.

"We've become a sedentary society. Kids used to play outside and get exercise. Today, we have to teach kids that activity is fun, and teach them the skills that they need to be more active and fit," she said.

### New ballgames

Students at Girard's Rice Avenue Middle School get fit by dancing the "Cha Cha Slide" along with climbing rock walls, tossing horseshoes, and even playing Guitar Hero and other interactive video games.

The middle school students will even be skateboarding in PE classes soon. New fitness grants will pay for skateboards, helmets and protective padding.

"We've changed our whole physical education curriculum in recent years. We still teach basketball and soccer. But we needed to get current and do things like playing bocce and teaching kids to dance the 'Cupid Shuffle' -- things that they can do outside of class," physical education teacher Marylou Billings said.

Girard High School physical education students learn to kayak in the school pool, and to fly-fish, mountain bike, skate, and ski in an elective Outdoor Adventures class that includes a weekend backpacking trip in the Allegheny National Forest.

"We teach kids that aren't used to being outdoors to utilize the natural resources we have around here, along Elk Creek and beyond," physical education teacher Scott Russell said. "And they seem to love it."

Students use treadmills, rowing machines and other sophisticated equipment in classes that focus on cardiovascular workouts. Many schools, including McDowell, provide heart monitors so that students can reach and maintain optimum exercise levels while they exercise.

"It helps students get serious about getting fit. A number of students have lost 15 to 25 pounds of body fat," Spicher said.

### More class time

Schools are expanding not only physical education activities, but class time besides.

Northwestern High School expanded physical education to a semester-long course this school year. Titusville Area School District offers physical education daily. In the Girard School District, Billings hopes to expand Rice Avenue Middle School's nine-week program to a semester-long course for 2010-11.

"Forty-five days a year for physical education just aren't enough," Billings said.

Many schools further extend fitness programs by opening facilities to students before and after school. But at Mercyhurst Preparatory School, using cardio equipment in and after school isn't enough for a growing number of students, physical education teacher Kirk Skelton said.

"I've been surprised at the increase in the last couple of years in the number of kids who are also working out at LECOM or Nautilus or the YMCA," Skelton said.

### Funding fitness

Grants have augmented school allocations to expand their physical education programs at a number of area schools.

A \$1.1 million Carol M. White Physical Education Program Grant helped the Millcreek Township School District extend and coordinate kindergarten to 12th grade physical education programs in 2008-09, Spicher said.

Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield grants have financed physical education improvements at dozens of northwestern Pennsylvania schools.

"Promoting healthy lifestyles is really important to us," Highmark Community Affairs Director Jim Martin said. "When fewer and fewer kids are outside playing, schools form the front line in helping them be active and healthy."

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