

Work looks like play at PE teachers' institute

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Beanbags flew through the air as teammates attempted to knock a giant “obesity ball” – a huge cloth-covered orb some 10 times bigger than the standard beach ball – back toward the opposing side’s goal line.

Nearby, other students sharpened fine motor skills as they threw and caught balls one after another in a “group juggling” exercise.

And in the far corner of the gym, another group of students gleefully practiced their zombie walk as they learned the steps to Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” dance.

Other activities in the week’s agenda: fencing with foam noodles; hip-hop dancing; jumping jack tag; Frisbee fitness routines; building foam brick skyscrapers; jump rope routines; creepy crawler tag...

The students are all Colorado physical education teachers, and the instructors are all national award-winners who’ve come from around the country to participate in the 8th annual Denver Public Schools Physical Education and Dance Summer Institute, a three-day affair that culminates Wednesday, June 16 at Metropolitan State College.

Though it looks for all the world like summer camp for adults, it’s actually a professional development course that gradually is changing the way physical education is taught in Colorado, insists Eric Larson, DPS physical education coordinator and organizer of the event.

Barb Francklyn, P.E. teacher at Foothills Elementary in Colorado Springs, tries bouncing a ball with a frog-shaped beanbag atop it.

“What they’re learning at the institute, they take back to their classrooms,” he said. “Everything they’re going through is a learning situation for them, so they can go back and keep their kids as active as possible. It’s all standards-based, so what while it looks like a lot of fun and games, they’re actually learning how to better assess students’ progress, and how to better work with their students when they get back to the classroom.”

This year’s institute drew 240 teachers, including 107 of DPS’ 169 P.E. teachers. Others came from around the state, some from as far away as Dolores, nearly eight hours west of Denver, for the chance to take part – and to earn continuing education credits.

“I just want to learn more fitness routines,” said Emily Hill, a P.E. teacher at Stuart Middle School in the Brighton School District. “My favorite instructor is Jo Dixon, from Fort Collins. She’s awesome! This absolutely will make me a better teacher.”

Dixon, P.E. teacher at Fort Collins High School, was the 2005 National Association for Sport and Physical Education's Central District Middle School Physical Education Teacher of the Year. She led workshops in warm-ups to get youngsters smiling, sweating and having fun. "I want a warm-up to increase their heart rate, warm up their muscles for activity, allow students to socialize and get oxygen to the brain," she said.

But face it, doing the "Thriller Dance" is just fun, no matter how old you are. (Watch teachers learning to do the famous dance from the Michael Jackson video, below.)

Instructor Rich Cendali, who has been teaching physical education at Boulder Valley's Douglass Elementary School for 28 years, is another former Physical Education Teacher of the Year. He, too, is a passionate promoter of youngsters having fun in physical education class.

"You are the most important person in the school," Cendali told his colleagues, just before inviting students to join in a game of tag. "Because what does everyone want to do? Play! Do they want to do math all day? No! But you have to be enthusiastic."

"That's why I'm still teaching after all these years," Cendali said. "Where else can you play all day and still get paid?"

Melanie Champion, a former National Middle School P.E. Teacher of the Year from North Carolina, has Colorado colleagues racing around the gym to teach them energizing games youngsters love to play.

Other instructors at the summer institute include: Kathy Wagner, 2008 NASPE National Elementary P.E. Teacher of the Year, from Wichita, Kan.; Melanie Champion, 2001 NASPE National Middle School P.E. Teacher of the Year, from Holden Beach, N.C.; Debbie Buenger, 2008 NASPE National High School P.E. Teacher of the Year, from Westminster, Md.; Lisa Summers, 2009 NASPE National High School P.E. Teacher of the Year, from Olympia, Wash.; Mary Ann Laverty, 2009 National Dance Association Dance Educator of the year, from Newport News, Va.; Dave Martinez, 2009 American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation Adaptive PE Teacher of the Year, from Jasper, Ga.; Pam Powers, 2004 NASPE southwest district Elementary PE Teacher of the Year and the director of education services for Sporttime, which markets physical education equipment; Billy Gober, past coordinator of training for NASPE Teachers of the Year, from Elizabethton, Tenn.; Cindy Gober, the Tennessee Middle and High School P.E. Teacher of the Year, also from Elizabethton; and Sue Brittenham, physical education coordinator for Boulder Valley Schools.

Brittenham led the institute's one sit-down-and-listen type class: "Unpacking the Colorado Physical Education Content Standards." It's the class Larson is most excited about.

"I think the word 'unpacking' is a good word," he said. "We're coming up with a curriculum road map, ideas for incorporating those new standards into the classroom instead of just having them down on a piece of paper."

“I like all the activities,” said Tabatha Sisneros, physical education teacher at The Academy, a charter school in Broomfield. “This is very innovative. I probably won’t do a lot of yoga with my kids but yoga bingo, that’s pretty cool