

Grants make gym dandy in C.F.

By EMILY CHRISTENSEN, emily.christensen@wfcourier.com | Posted: Sunday, October 25, 2009 3:00 pm

CEDAR FALLS --- A fun beat belts from the sound system in the Cedar Heights Elementary School gymnasium.

Second-graders are scattered around the room, maneuvering their way up the rock-climbing wall, jumping rope and hanging from the chin-up bar. After just two minutes, the music and the children stop.

They now have 10 seconds to find their way to the next of six stations set up around the gym. Some move along to a series of step aerobic boxes where letter, color and word flashcards are laid out on the floor. As they step up and down, the students go through the tasks on the flash cards. In another corner, students toss a ball at similar flashcards taped to the wall.

It is called Action Based Learning Lab, and it is the new age of physical education in Cedar Falls elementary schools. Second-graders are no longer just learning to hop, skip and jump; they are learning to do all of this while also building their mental capacity.

The program, developed by Jean Blades, is meant to improve balance, coordination, spatial awareness and visual literacy.

"Four schools were already doing this, because we had seen it at a physical education conference," said Julie Simonson, the Cedar Heights PE teacher and elementary department head.

"We felt strongly, especially with the focus on reading, language and social studies in the classroom, that we needed to implement something that would overlap with what the classroom teachers are doing," Simonson said.

Gym classes districtwide will be overhauled this year as the physical education teachers begin spending the \$450,000 grant they recently received from the Carol White Physical Education Program, run by the U.S. Department of Education. The district, if all first-year goals are met, will have the opportunity to receive an additional \$450,000 over the course of the next two years. About 95 awards, ranging from \$100,000 to \$500,000 per project, are awarded each year.

The receiving district must offer a 10 percent match in the first year and 25 percent matches in years two and three. Troy Becker, an associate principal and assistant athletics coordinator at the high school, said the district was able to use money already budgeted for the physical education program, some equipment inventory costs, volunteer time and additional staff hours to man the weight room for most of the district-required funds.

Grant goals

Becker said the grant will help children improve their fitness while they are in school and as they transition to life beyond graduation. "Our main goal is to increase awareness about fitness and wellness.," Becker said. "We've always done a lot with team sports, but we want to begin to talk more about how students can live a life of personal wellness and physical fitness."

The most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, dated from 2003 to 2006, showed that for children between 6 and 11 and 12 and 19 years the prevalence of obesity was 17 percent and 17.6 percent, respectively. This is more than three times the target prevalence of 5 percent set in Healthy People 2010.

Gym teachers at each school will have pedometers and heart rate monitors so students can see just how hard they are working. This month, teachers are taking baseline measurements so student fitness levels can be gauged for improvement throughout the year.

The additional money will help the district comply with the Healthy Kids Act, which went into affect July 1. The legislation mandates minimum amounts of daily physical activity for students at all grade levels and requires graduating seniors to be certified in cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Becker said the district does not meet the requirements using just PE time alone at any level.

Year one

Elementary school gym teachers are focusing the first year on implementing the new curriculum. Blades, the program creator, will visit teachers later this year for additional training. Simonson said the heart rate monitors and pedometers will also become regular pieces of equipment.

Alex Oakland, the Holmes Middle School PE teacher, said it has been difficult to get too deep into the grant possibilities because the school is under construction and the gym is being used for the library and classrooms. Instead, he is focusing on heart rate monitors, pedometers and other portable pieces of equipment.

Dan Bower, the ECHOES coordinator at Holmes, has utilized some of the new equipment to pilot after-school programs promoting health and physical activity. New options include healthy cooking, outside games and personal training. Even the school newspaper is adding a health section.

Jamie Smith, a high school PE teacher and department head, said the first year will be a big one for her students. A new cardio room, including treadmills, stationary bikes and elliptical machines, should be ready for use by spring break. The room will be open to both students and staff before and after school. The weight room will also get some updates.

"This allows us to individualize our program. We want these kids to learn how they would train. More than likely, in college they won't be playing pickleball. They will be in the weight room at the rec. They need to know how to use this kind of fitness equipment," Smith said.

That is not to say that the kids won't still participate in group sports. Teachers at all three levels said their students would get the traditional gym experiences, like softball, volleyball and basketball.

"It's still important for kids to understand the team concept," Oakland said.

Money in action

In 2005, Grundy Center received nearly \$500,000 from the same grant program. Rick Schupbach, the district's head physical education teacher, said the traditional delivery of physical education is no longer working.

"When you see the statistics that are out there, we had to start looking at how to change the way we do business," he said. "Other areas of education are being asked to increase rigor and relevance. The academic bar has been raised."

And so has Grundy Center's. The district now uses technology like heart rate monitors and pocket PCs to objectively grade student participation and progress. The work done inside the classroom is only part of the solution, Schupbach said. The district also used its grant money to lay the foundation for a fitness room now used by the entire community. The schools now partner with the YMCA to run the mini health club.

"By branching outside the walls of our gym we can have adults who take better care of themselves. And if they are doing that, then the students will hopefully end up taking better care of themselves, too," he said. "There is no quick fix to this problem. It is about creating lifestyle changes."

Planning for the future

Oakland said her students will really start to see a change in their PE options in the second and third year of the grant when money will be used to outfit the new weight rooms with both strength and cardio machines.

"We had some old, old stuff in the our weight room. We had some hand-me-down bits and pieces from the high school, but we were looking for outside funds to update the new weight room," Oakland said. "The old one, it just didn't meet today's standards."

Both elementary and high school students can look forward to a Dance, Dance, Revolution unit --- which will include adaptable units for special needs students.

In the third year, the high school has plans to purchase DINE Healthy, a diet and exercise analysis software program that will be incorporated into the health classes.

Money has also been set aside to install climbing walls at both North Cedar and Southdale.

"I want kids to walk away from this knowing what it means to be healthy and having the right principles and background to make healthy choices," Smith said. "They need to know how to exercise and eat right and to make choices that will interest them so they stick with it."