

Active and healthy schools get kids moving

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Students participate in an activity break during class. Credit: MU Cooperative Media Group

Last month, first lady Michelle Obama launched "Let's Move," a new campaign to combat childhood obesity. The initiative seeks to improve school nutrition programs and promote physical activity. In Missouri, one elementary school is seeing the benefits of incorporating physical activity in their classrooms with the adoption of the Active and Healthy Schools Program. The program, implemented by University of Missouri researchers, has helped to increase kids' activity levels, improve their attention span and reduce discipline problems.

The Active and Healthy Schools Program is being tested at [Leslie Bell Elementary School](#) with the guidance of Steve Ball, MU associate professor of exercise physiology and MU Extension state fitness specialist. As a part of the program, students participate in 3-5 minute activity breaks throughout the day. Activity breaks include activity-based

games such as jumping, walking or climbing stairs, and may occur inside or outside of the classroom. After breaks, teachers resume schoolwork and students' attention levels are restored.

"The kids love the activity breaks because it gives them something active and fun to do," said Amanda Fienkeldie, guidance counselor at Leslie Bell Elementary School. "Since the program began, discipline referrals among kids with chronic [behavior problems](#) have decreased, and there is a significant improvement in their academics, participation and ability to stay on task."

In addition to activity breaks, students and faculty wear pedometers to fuel competition among students and teachers and increase the number of their steps. Activity zones are placed throughout playgrounds to engage students in different activities, including hula-hoop, jump-rope and games. Signs and pictures with healthy messages about nutrition and activity are displayed in classrooms and throughout the school.

"The idea is to help schools demonstrate to kids the importance of physical activity and nutrition," Ball said. "The program encourages small changes that schools can build on to gradually create an environment that reflects health and fitness."

Prior to implementing the program, teachers were instructed on how to manage activity breaks without disrupting academic schedules. Ball presented research explaining how the program can improve learning, decrease discipline problems and increase [physical activity](#) in students at a young age, which makes them more likely to be healthy as adults.

"Now, the kids are more excited about PE and recess," said Gayle Frerking, physical education teacher at Leslie Bell Elementary School. "Students are starting to participate more in youth basketball, dance and gymnastics programs. What they're learning in school is being spread

outside the school and into the community."

Initial research for the Active and Healthy Schools Program was conducted at Arizona State University. In the initial study of the program at a school in Arizona, researchers found significant increases in students' steps and a reduction in absences and school nurse visits. The researchers also received positive feedback from parents, [students](#) and school personnel.

The current study is designed to further evaluate the program and encourage surrounding school districts to adopt similar efforts. It is funded in part by a grant from the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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