Putting the Gym Back in Gym Class

Shannon Loomis, 11, lifts weights designed for children at Madison Junior High School in Naperville, Ill., where the gym resembles a well-equipped Bally.

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Published: October 13, 2005

PHIL LAWLER, a longtime physical education teacher, used to try to transform all his middle-school students, even the pudgy or uncoordinated ones, into athletes. He taught them to play basketball and baseball and ran them through drills to improve their game.

But his priorities have since shifted away from sports skills. "Our ultimate goal now is health and fitness," he said. Today Mr. Lawler is involved in a movement overhauling physical education. He directs the PE4life Academy in Naperville, Ill., a school training the next generation of physical education teachers. And at Madison Junior High School in Naperville, where he taught for 30 years, the gym resembles a well-equipped Bally, with treadmills, elliptical machines and even a rock climbing wall.

Students wear heart-rate monitors around their chests and check their special watches to make sure they stay in their target heart-rate zone. Stationary bikes are equipped with Sony PlayStation game consoles so the children can compete with on-screen opponents. A fitness "arcade" features Dance Revolution, a musical electronic game that requires users to stand on a platform and move where the game tells them to. And students wear T-shirts that read, "Gettin' Fit for Life" and "Madison Health Club."

Schools are increasingly taking a total wellness approach to what used to be the rough-and-tumble hour of a child's day. Gone is the sports-oriented template of the past, and in its
place are fitness programs, which, advocates say, make kids healthier.

While group sports are still part of the curriculum, the new strategy is to teach skills that are useful beyond gym class. Instead of learning how to dodge a ball or climb a rope, children are taught to lift weights, balance their diets and build cardiovascular endurance. They are graded in part by how long they stay in their target heart rate.

"It's about giving these kids the tools and skills and experience so they can lead a physically active life the rest of their life," said Anne Flannery, the president of PE4life, an advocacy group that sets up the academies and lobbies for federal funds for innovative phys ed programs nationally.

Given that 15 percent of American children 6 to 18 are overweight or obese, according to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, advocates say more money and thought must be put into phys ed curriculums. In many cases that may mean not just replacing the old gym-class model with fitness programs but also starting up phys ed programs because school boards often "put P.E. on the chopping block, cutting it entirely or decreasing" its teachers or the number of days it is offered, said Alicia Moag-Stahlberg, the executive director of Action for Healthy Kids, a nonprofit organization promoting nutrition and physical activity in schools.

Today only 5.8 percent to 8 percent of schools provide what phys ed advocates recommend - gym classes five times a week - according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

School administrators began cutting physical education programs decades ago, in part because of the way many classes were taught. Budget cutters who remembered playing dodgeball and Red Rover came to view gym class as dispensable. But in recent years, as teaching children a lifelong approach to fitness has replaced the ad-hoc phys ed of old, it has become difficult for budget administrators and school principals to contest its necessity.

The wisdom of the new approach has some scientific support. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin have demonstrated how effective the fit-for-life model of gym class can be. They observed how 50 overweight children lost more weight when they cycled, skied cross-country and walked with pedometers than when they played sports during that class time. The researchers also found that teaching sports like football and kickball resulted in less overall movement, partly because reluctant students were able to sit on the bench. The study was published in the October issue of the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine.