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'There is no replacing face-to-face instruction': PE classes look different this fall as schools resume remote learning

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By: Madhu Krishnamurthy - Daily Herald Media Group



Getting elementary-age students to focus in gym class from the other side of a computer screen can be exhausting, said Andrea Rodino, a virtual physical education teacher at Frank C. Whiteley Elementary School in Hoffman Estates.

Remote learning is dramatically changing the way physical education classes are taught this fall at most suburban public schools. Teachers are using live and video instruction and prescribing activities students can perform safely at home using household materials.

They also are emphasizing how staying active during the pandemic can help improve students' mental and social-emotional health.

"There is no replacing face-to-face instruction," Rodino said, "but the kids love their time in PE even virtually. They are craving the physical activity, so it hasn't been that hard to keep them engaged. They are excited to get up and moving."

Rodino said the biggest challenge with remote learning is connecting individually with her kindergarten through sixth grade students during live group classes through the Google Meet videoconferencing platform. It's harder meeting students where they are and getting to know how they feel about physical education in the virtual setting, she said.

During a half-hour class from her living room, Rodino models the locomotor skills students need to master, such as walking, running, skipping, hopping, jumping, and leaping. She creates games to keep it interesting.

"In the spring, it was more of a choice," Rodino said. "And now they are going to be assessed for their skills."

Setting expectations for how students conduct themselves in a virtual classroom is part of holding them accountable. Students must find a quiet place to actively engage in class, wear appropriate clothing, be ready to move, and follow proper classroom etiquette, said Jenn Wills, a traveling elementary physical education teacher in Aurora-based Indian Prairie Unit District 204.

That was the greatest challenge in the spring when the pandemic forced schools to switch to virtual learning.

"I had younger siblings dancing and making faces in the background, parents sitting next to their students and doing classwork for them or answering the question. I had a few animals who made cameo appearances ... [and] a couple of students who Zoomed from their beds in their jammies," Wills said. "It was a learning experience even for the teachers."

With restrictions on team-based sports and on students engaging in outdoor play with peers, there is a greater focus now on getting students to set personal fitness goals and take charge of their own health and nutrition.

"We might be developing better lifelong healthy habits for our kids," said John Bruesch, assistant superintendent of teaching and learning for Barrington Unit District 220. "The focus right now is squarely on creating healthy and health-wise 35-year-olds rather than maybe developing college athletes through participation in sports. Not that athletics isn't important to us, but right now we don't have the opportunity."

Teachers also are helping students develop coping skills and understand the connection between physical health and mental health.

At the high school level, building strength and endurance remain primary goals, but students also need to learn what is happening within their bodies, said Andrew Burton, physical education teacher and wellness department chairman for Wauconda High School.

During daily 50-minute periods, students will perform repetitive exercises involving push-ups, squats, situps, stretches and other movements and will set their own limits. They also will create their own workouts incorporating essential fitness components – flexibility, muscular fitness, strength and endurance – he said.

While most students don't have access to athletic facilities or equipment, they can use available resources, such as sidewalks, parks, trails, weights or other household items like soup cans, milk jugs and laundry detergent for training.

"Some kids have full gyms in their houses, some kids don't have anything," said Tracey Jakaitis, student wellness coordinator for **Elgin Area School District U-46**. "We are not asking kids to go outside, because it might not be safe. We're just trying to get to know where they are at and what they have before we can put lessons into place. We're personalizing PE."

Last fall, U-46 debuted new curriculum allowing high school students to choose from among courses on functional fitness, strength and performance, walking for wellness, officiating and coaching.

"We always want physical activity to be deliberate," said Stephanie Katzenberger, physical education teacher at South Elgin High School. "We have a real opportunity now to emphasize the education part of physical education. When students take more ownership of their own physical activity, it could really be a game-changer in PE."