

Working up a sweat to work better in school

By Journal-Constitution, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.24.13

Word Count **844**



Fourth-graders (from left) Makenzie Thompson, Reagan Lloyd and Jayda Smith use exercise bands in a program after school at Stonewall Tell Elementary School, Sept. 9, 2013, in College Park, Ga. Stonewall's exercise program is not new, but it just won a gold award from the state for its efforts to get kids moving and be healthy. Photo: Kent D. Johnson/Atlanta Journal-Constitution/MCT

ATLANTA — As the school year neared a close last April, officials in Georgia issued an urgent plea: add 30 minutes of exercise into the school day.

State Superintendent John Barge and Georgia Department of Public Health Commissioner Brenda Fitzgerald made their case for more exercise in a letter to state school superintendents. They pointed to the staggering results of a statewide fitness study: Only 16 percent of the state's students passed five tests of physical fitness.

One in five students could not pass any of the five tests last year.

With so many children in the state [obese](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=obesity) — that is, extremely overweight — and also weak, the message was simple: Find a way to get kids moving more.

10 Minutes Of "Deskercize"

The idea was not to replace recess or physical education (PE) class, though. School systems instead were asked to develop new and innovative exercise programs to weave into an already time-pressed day.

Georgia schools have responded: More than 100 have agreed to add 30 or more minutes of exercise into the daily schedule. The new activities include yoga classes before the first bell rings and walking and running clubs after school and 10-minute "deskercize" and brain breaks.

Stonewall Tell Elementary PE teacher Lisa Sinon is getting pedometers, which measure how much you walk, for every student. They will be used to encourage kids at the College Park school to take 10,000 steps every day.

Georgia's fitness problem grew over the years. Schools that were trying to raise kids' grades cut or even got rid of PE. Even recess was dropped in some cases. But exercise is now being given much more importance.

Exercise is a good way to reduce obesity. But there may be another reason to add more of it: Children who exercise seem to do better in school.

Kidz Bop On Walking Wednesdays

Recently the state has been making slight progress in reducing child obesity, particularly among the most overweight children. The childhood obesity rate in Georgia has now fallen to 16.5 percent from 21.3 percent in 2007.

Huntley Hills Elementary School is one of the schools adding new exercises. It offers a morning program called "Tiger Tune Up." Kids play in the gym before class starts, with everything from hula hoops to plastic balls. On "Walking Wednesdays" PE teacher Elisabeth Spaulding plays Kidz Bop (recordings of kids performing current pop hits) while the students walk laps inside the gym.

But it's a new after-school bike program on Thursdays that has kids asking, "Is it Thursday yet?" every day of the week.

Some kids bring their bikes to school, and Spaulding also bought 10 bikes for kids who don't have one. She lets kids ride around an empty parking lot or field by the school.

Kids not only worked up a sweat. A handful, including several fifth-graders, learned how to ride a bike through the program.

Family Fitness Nights

Exercise is also given a lot of attention at Stonewall Tell. The school is one of 51 across the state that recently received a gold SHAPE Honor Roll medal. The award is part of a new program designed to fight childhood obesity.

PE teacher Sinon has organized several activities promoting healthy living. These include an annual family fitness night, complete with rock climbing and three-bean-salad tastings. She has also teamed up with Radio Disney and Children's Healthcare of Atlanta's Strong4Life program.

In PE class, Sinon encourages kids to invent their own games. She often brings out a cart with plastic balls and lets kids develop their own twist on a chase and tag game.

A group of youngsters recently came up with a "Diary of a Wimpy Kid tag," named after the popular children's book series. Now the kids play the game at recess.

After school, a Fitness Enrichment Club mixes a variety of exercises, from dance to basketball.

Junk Food Snacks Expelled

Sinon is not alone in her efforts to encourage healthy living. Other teachers, principals and even parents help keep junk food snacks out of school. For example, cupcakes are not allowed, even on birthdays.

"If a parent brings cupcakes, he or she will be stopped at the front desk," said Sinon. "But what is happening is parents are bringing beautiful and delicious fruit platters and the kids like them."

Jennifer Thompson is the mother of Stonewall Tell fourth-grader Makenzie. She is a big supporter of the growing attention given to health and wellness.

"It's very important that we instill the importance of 30 minutes of exercise every day," said Thompson. "I am OK with breaks during the school day for kids to get exercise. It's so good for them. It's stimulating for the brain and helps with learning to get those breaks during the day." Makenzie said she loves all of the opportunities she gets to exercise at school. And she's noticed it is making a difference in her life.

"If I exercise after school and then do my homework, it only takes me 30 minutes," she said. "But if I don't exercise and just go directly to do my homework, it takes me an hour."

Quiz

- 1 What is one central idea of the article?
 - (A) Children are learning to invent their own games in the fight against obesity.
 - (B) Many children in the state of Georgia are obese and failing to pass fitness tests.
 - (C) Stonewell Tell Elementary School is getting new pedometers for all of its students.
 - (D) Students are excited about a new weekly bike riding program at Huntley Hills Elementary.

- 2 Select the paragraph in the article that BEST supports the central idea that many people are involved in helping to solve the childhood health problem in Georgia.

- 3 Which sentence is MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
 - (A) School systems instead were asked to develop new and innovative exercise programs to weave into an already time-pressed day.
 - (B) The childhood obesity rate in Georgia has now fallen to 16.5 percent from 21.3 percent in 2007.
 - (C) But it's a new after-school bike program on Thursdays that has kids asking, "Is it Thursday yet?" every day of the week.
 - (D) The school is one of 51 across the state that recently received a gold SHAPE Honor Roll medal.

- 4 How are the main ideas MOST CLEARLY developed throughout the course of the article?
 - (A) by using quotes of students to share their experiences in fitness activities
 - (B) by listing the poor scores of children on fitness testing throughout the country
 - (C) by describing the many ways that exercise is being added to schooldays in Georgia
 - (D) by sharing results of a new exercise program at an award-winning school in College Park