

Active minds and bodies

Montessori Children's House provides physical education every day for students

By Carol South
Herald contributing writer

Every day for half an hour, students can run, jump rope, play catch, bounce basketballs or burn off their energy in a range of games and activities.

The 150 minutes designated per week for physical education at the Montessori Children's House represents a school-wide commitment to health and well being.

A step above the state requirements, the Montessori Children's House is laying a foundation for a lifetime of vibrant health for its K-6th grade students. For the past four years, every lower and upper elementary classroom makes time for some physical activity. Students, seeing that a school day always includes exercise, get the message that it is important — which teachers hope translates into lifetime choices.

"It isn't necessarily about Montessori philosophy, although it certainly fits in the realm," said Michele Shane, head of school. "It's more about our commitment to children and a reflection of what's going on in the culture."

Recognizing how busy families are outside of school hours, Shane said that the school's commitment to physical education is also meant to fill in gaps.

"Outside of school, they're going from one activity to another and some are

active and some are not," she added. "As far as I know, we are the only school in this entire region that has made a commitment to have PE every day,"

For the students, gym time with teacher Steve Maas is a treasured part of the day. It is a welcome respite from academic pursuits that helps them refocus their minds when they return to class.

"I like the games we play, like dodge ball, and I also like some of the group games," said Olivia Hagerty, a sixth grader at the school. "PE is a time when you let it out and run around like crazy. It takes away energy so when I working I'm not talking."

Maas, who proposed the move from classroom teacher to full-time physical education teacher in 2003, pointed to studies documenting the benefits of aerobic activity at any age.

"I've just been reading more research, there are proteins produced when we exercise

that can help us make more brain cells," he said. "For a long time we thought it was fixed."

In addition to general movement and conditioning activities, Maas also leads students through two-week chunks focusing on skills needed for sports ranging from basketball to golf to volleyball. One of his goals is to spark an interest in activities that students can do for a lifetime.

"I try to vary the activities," said Maas, a Montessori teacher since 1992.

The gist of the workouts is less about competition with others than each student achieving their potential. This makes the activities more fun and helps avoid negative associations some children can form about exercise that can linger into adulthood.

"Steve really works very hard to be about doing your personal best rather than doing better than your peers," said Shane.

In the bigger picture, the school is teaching about nutrition, what whole foods look like and food preparation. Maas also teaches a health class that is incorporated with physical education.

This fall, for example, students harvested the tomatoes grown in the on-site greenhouse. They also helped process them into sauce that will be served at the school during lunches this winter.

"We've been blessed with a grant from the Allen Foundation to help us have a Della Terra program," said Shane, of the edible garden program that began in September of 2006, another facet of the school's approach to promoting a lifetime of good health and nutrition.

For more information on the Montessori Children's House, call 929-9325.



Herald photo by Carol South

Montessori Children's House students in grades K-6 get gym time every day, including these upper elementary students, as the school carves out 150 minutes a week for physical education.