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Physical activity and learning go hand in hand, expert says

By Kathy Walsh Nufer

Post-Crescent staff writer August 16, 2006

APPLETON — Neurokinesiologist Jean Blaydes Madigan believes the best way to nourish children's brainpower is to get them up and moving.

The former classroom and physical education teacher from Murphy, Texas, now consults on how brain research links movement to learning. She said there is a "lot of emphasis today on students sitting in class loading up on academics," when they should do quite the opposite.

"Our kids need to be physically active to help their brains function better," Madigan said. "When we interact with information, we process more and better."

Speaking Tuesday to more than 300 Fox Valley educators during the Education for Healthy Kids Summer Institute at Appleton East High School, Madigan said 85 percent of children learn kinesthetically.

She got the audience on its feet to prove her point.

They stomped, clapped, twisted and sang, and in the process committed facts to memory.

Movement not only enhances focus and attention, spatial awareness and motor skills that lay the framework for reading, but can bring a lethargic or hyperactive child back into balance, she said.

Kids need recess, and they need exercise periodically throughout the day in the classroom and in daily physical education, which most schools do not provide, she said. Wisconsin requires physical education three times a week.

John Mielke, an Appleton school board member who introduced Madigan, said he finds it ironic that nationwide there is so much emphasis on No Child Left Behind, test scores and cutbacks in art, music and physical education, "But we're doing just the opposite with more than 300 people here."

The institute was created to give participants research-based knowledge about the learning and nutrition/fitness connection, and an opportunity to plan for their schools.

Last year, team members from Appleton's Einstein Middle School devised a healthy eating and fitness plan for staff.

"We wanted staff on board first," said Dennis Giaimo, a physical education teacher. "This year

we're doing something for our students."

Interest in the three-day institute, which has grown every year and includes topics from teaching the teen brain to food chemistry, is such that it may run a fourth year, said Lee Allinger, Appleton's deputy superintendent. "This is becoming more of a focal point across the state," he said.

Margie Kaphingst, a New London physical education teacher, said her team signed up to "hopefully enhance the wellness policy we have." State and federal law requires all districts to have a wellness policy by fall.

As for increasing movement in the classroom, Kaphingst said, "It's something we're trying incorporate to get teachers more aware of so they can do it outside P.E."

Meg Zabel, who teaches East at-risk students, liked what Madigan had to say about movement and learning but there are challenges. The big question is how do we get high school kids to move more given our physical constraints?"

Einstein teacher Alyssa Mader works with children with severe cognitive disabilities but already is thinking of ways to help them learn. "I can use more movement to help them connect words to their meanings," she said.