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Exercise regimen good fit for kids

Becky Manley | The Journal Gazette

HUNTINGTON – Smiles, paper-cup toasts and high-fives were shared by a group of Northwest Elementary School students Wednesday after a mile run.

The happy exchanges were a marked difference from last fall when the same running test left many of the students breathless and some in tears. The run, along with timed pushups, a flexibility test and height and weight checks, were given to students who participated in the Huntington school's KidFit program.

The program, which began with 16 participants last fall, has students arrive at school early three days a week for a 45-minute exercise session.

The program is part of a three-year study the school is conducting with Huntington University.

Although final results won't be available until the study is concluded, organizers have already noted improvement in the students' physical stamina and their academic performance, according to Erin Holloway, a Northwest Elementary physical education teacher.

"Their endurance has been unbelievable," Holloway said.

That endurance helped one student shave seven minutes off the time it took to run a mile, according to Matthew Ruiz, 31, a Huntington University professor participating in the study.

Holloway expects the positive academic effect of the program will be apparent when spring test results become available. About eight of the students participating in KidFit were considered to be at-risk academically in the fall, Holloway said.

Ruiz said the connection between physical activity and academic performance is unclear.

"It's a bit of a mystery still," Ruiz said.

None of the students dropped out of the program, although two did move to another school. Holloway credited the students and their parents who transported them to school early for the program's success.

"It was much better than I hoped for," Holloway said.

Because two fifth-graders who participated this year will advance to middle school in the fall, the program had four vacancies for next fall. Holloway said she conducted a lottery to pick four students from among the about 60 Northwest Elementary students who had hoped to fill those vacancies.

Students don't have to pay a fee to participate in KidFit, Holloway said, and the school obtained exercise equipment with grant money.

Two KidFit participants – Kaitlin Aughinbaugh, 10, a fourth-grader, and Colton Sheets, 11, a fifth-grader – said they found it easier to concentrate on schoolwork on days they exercised and both expect to continue to work out on their own over the summer.



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Maddie Houser completes her pushups while finishing the year-end test for the KidFit program.

Despite the fact this year's KidFit participants included students in grades 2 to 5, Holloway said students were supportive of one another and there were no rivalries.

"It's just been a nice, united group," Holloway said. "It makes it fun."

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