

Venice Y charter school has new twist on education



Sky Academy seventh-graders Dylan Monk, left, and Ross McCollum share a laugh over a healthy lunch at the charter school Wednesday at the YMCA in Venice. The school promotes a healthy lifestyle and physical fitness in a learning environment.

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VENICE - While other schools are cutting P.E., or making it optional, the new SKY Academy sprints in the opposite direction.

The YMCA charter school, which opened in August, requires students to take not one but two physical education classes. Every morning and every afternoon, they break a sweat.

At SKY — an awkward acronym for "Strength and Knowledge at the YMCA" — the idea is that exercise makes students more alert in academic classes, too.

"There's more blood in your brain," explains Anthony Allport, a Venice sixth-grader. "So you can think better and quicker."

SKY might not be unique — there is great variety among the nation's 5,600 public charter schools — but it is different. YMCA officials don't know of any other charter quite like it.

But it could quickly become a model for others to follow, boosting both Y programs and education.

Principal Oleh Bula, a former chemistry teacher and track coach, believes in the middle school program.

"It's common sense," he says. "If you let kids be active, if they burn off all that energy, they're going to be more attentive."

Bula — his Ukrainian name is pronounced "boola" — turns to a bookshelf in his tiny office. He pulls out a much-highlighted copy of "Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain."

In that 2008 book, Harvard psychiatry professor John Ratey explains how exercise prepares the brain to learn, improving mood and attention while lowering stress and anxiety.

That's what SKY is all about.

Erin Holloway, a P.E. teacher from Indiana, moved her family to Venice to be part of the school. She believes in the body preparing the mind to learn.

"I see it," Holloway says. "I see it in the kids."

'Exploded crayon box'

\The SKY Academy was South County Family YMCA CEO Ken Modzelewski's idea.

Students get a free YMCA membership, which encourages parents' involvement. Many families already participate in Venice wellness programs.

"I thought it'd be good for the Y," Modzelewski says. "Now we're getting calls from other YMCAs interested in doing this. We think we're setting some trends here."

South County has invested \$2 million in SKY, starting with a new school building on its Venice campus. The two-story structure, designed by Englewood architect Elaine Miller, has a playful design in bright colors.

"If you look at our school," says Heather Braswell, a seventh-grader, "it looks like an exploded crayon box."

The SKY Academy plans to add eighth grade next year, but for now there are only nine teachers and 170 students. Everyone pitches in. When the school maintenance man went out a few weeks ago, Bula mopped the upstairs hallway.

Bula's wife Suzanne — "Mrs. B" to his "Dr. B." — is a former teacher who serves as director of student services.

She greets kids in the morning, making sure they tuck in their school uniforms. She hollers at them to get into line for lunch. She sees them off at the end of the day.

Mrs. B also plays interior decorator. She and a parent used a \$5,000 donation to buy IKEA furniture and furnishings. Now the school media center looks more like a clubhouse or coffee shop.

"This is the Starbucks-y feeling," she says. "The lights go down. There's supposed to be little nooks for reading. We're hoping to get iPads, all that nice stuff."

Gaga in the gym

For morning P.E., the SKY kids do a lot of running up and down Center Road. They've become a familiar sight in the Venice neighborhood.

Allwood, a blonde whippet, started the year by running the mile in 7 minutes and 12 seconds. Now he's down to 6:32.

For less fit students, the time changes have been more dramatic.

"My friend Zack has improved 5 minutes," Allwood says. "That's pretty cool."

In the afternoon, SKY kids get a lot of aerobic exercise in the YMCA gym. They break into groups for double-Dutch jump roping. The whole class gathers for "Sharks and Minnows," a chase game that has students sprinting back and forth.

All the while, pop music blares over a sound system. Kids dance, turn cartwheels and mouth the words to Lady Gaga songs.

Adults might expect students to be worn down, after one P.E. and several hours of classes, but Holloway finds the reverse is true in the afternoon.

"They're a lot more high-energy," she says, laughing. "This is their opportunity to get outside or get in the gym. They're ready to unload."

Charter rules

SKY, Sarasota County's ninth charter school, sets many of its own rules.

The academy has a longer day — 8 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. — than most schools. Parents must sign an agreement saying their children will stay late for extra study if they fall behind.

SKY educators have no job security.

"There's no union here," Bula says. "I could lose my job tomorrow. My teachers could lose their jobs tomorrow."

Bula earns \$90,000 per year, which is less than most Sarasota principals. All SKY teachers make \$42,000 a year, which is a pay cut for some.

Teachers have no off hours or planning periods. They cover for one another if someone gets sick, so the school can save money on substitutes.

Nicolette Smith, a social studies instructor, says many of the teachers liked the idea of joining a small charter moving in a new direction.

"We're in love with the vision of the school, and we're willing to sacrifice this first year," she says. "I feel like I'm working all the time, but we want the school to be successful. Hopefully, next year we'll see some adjustments."

Weighty subject

SKY is not a sports school. It's also not a weight-loss center.

Some students are lean and athletic. Some are heavy and uncoordinated. Most are somewhere in between.

SKY was founded, in part, because of startling obesity rates in the United States. More than 30 percent of Florida middle school students are considered overweight.

Academy teachers and administrators know weight can be a sensitive issue. They ignore size and shape. They emphasize health and wellness.

Kayleigh Garbrandt, a Venice seventh-grader, wanted to get into better condition. Her mom works out at the YMCA and heard about SKY. They agreed to give it a try.

"I was starting to get into that overweight category," Kayleigh says. "I thought it would be a good place for me. I've already lost 25 pounds, so it's much better."

Dianne Cogburn, a Venice nutritionist, heard about SKY and met with Bula. She urged him to work harder on a school menu of whole foods and healthy foods.

The SKY cafeteria serves things like turkey meat sloppy joes, along with a fat-free chocolate milk called Tru Moo. No soda, no hydrogenated fats, no high-fructose corn syrup. Fruit for dessert.

Students who bring their own lunch know better than to include junk food. Many choose the school cafeteria.

"I like the sloppy joes," says Alexis Johnson, a sixth-grader. "The Boca Burgers? Not at all."

All day, SKY preaches and teaches fitness and nutrition.

"In math class, we compare fractions with our heart rate," Kayleigh says. "In social studies, we talk about exercise backgrounds. In science, we talk about how our bodies react to exercise."

SKY personality

Bula, 45, is a former Marine who was once a chemistry teacher and track coach. Now he's trying to get in shape, too, munching bananas and nutrition bars at his desk.

In the spring, students are supposed to join him in a 5K challenge.

Mrs. B is less formal and more feisty, chasing after students with a pencil stuck in her hair. She and her husband keep up a running banter in the school lobby. They help give SKY a personality.

Laurie Molnar, an academy parent, enjoys the Bula show at the charter school.

"His personality and his wife's personality, they mesh very well," she says. "They're very strict, but they like to joke around."

Both of the Bulas spent years in mainstream schools. They have little patience for bureaucracy and arbitrary rules. They embrace the freedom that comes with running a charter.

"Yes, I like being different," the principal says. "Yes, I like shaking things up. Yes, I like setting a new template."

At SKY, that program starts with P.E. twice a day.