

Let's Get Physical

At Chicago's innovative Namaste school, kids learn their ABCs, yoga poses—and how to build a good salad for lunch

For years, schools around the country have been cutting down on P.E. And while child obesity is skyrocketing—up 45 percent since 10 years ago—many school cafeterias continue to serve meals high in sugar and fat. All of which makes tiny Namaste—now a school for kindergartners and first graders on Chicago's Southwest Side—a curious anomaly.

For starters, many kids walk to school—accompanied by a volunteer troop of parents. When they arrive, they down a nutritious breakfast. Next, they limber up with stretches called the lizard walk and frog jump. After that, everyone does deep-breathing exercises. Finally—fed, stretched and calmer—the kids start class.

Yes, it all sounds a bit crunchy-granola—loosely translated, the word *namaste* is Hindi for “my inner light salutes your inner light”—but the school's goals, says cofounder and principal Allison Slade, are purely practical. “We want to integrate health, physical fitness and nutrition as ways to get higher academic student achievement,” says Slade. “I'm not one of those organic people who will only eat things that fall from trees. But when I exercise, I get a lot more accomplished.”

A former teacher in the public school system, Slade, 28, was convinced that many of the behavioral and academic problems she encountered were linked



Students like Adelyena Villarreal, 7 (center), ease into their morning routine.



“I don't have to worry about her being sluggish,” says Jeanneta Cunningham of her daughter Khameron Cunningham, 6, who loads up at the salad bar.

to poor nutrition and lack of physical activity. Research backs her up: A 2004 study by the National Institute for Health Care Management Research and Educational Foundation and Rand Corp., for example, showed that overweight children scored significantly lower in math and reading than their normal-weight peers. Namaste opened last fall as a charter school—an independent public school that is monitored by the school district—for 90 students in a low-income area. Students get a full hour of gym as well as playtime outside each day, along with breakfast and lunch featuring fruit, vegetables and whole grains.

Namaste is a hit with its students. When her daughter Jocelyn, 6, was in public school, “I had problems with her every day, getting her up,” says Maritza Ortiz. “Now it’s unbelievable—



“I love being an important adult to the kids,” says Slade (with Casey Chestnut, 6).

she wants to go to school on Saturday!” In class, children smile as they perform yoga poses and giggle when they form letters of the alphabet with their bodies. “I like doing Rockin’ Robin in the gym,” says 5-year-old Rudy Flores. “We fly like birds!” First grader Katelyn Winkelman, 6, who was overweight before she started at Namaste, has lost 10 lbs. since September. “Now I eat less and don’t get stomachaches,” she says. Adds her mom, Jennifer: “My daughter has so much energy now. She’s even excited to do her homework.”

Over the next five years, Chicago’s Children’s Memorial Hospital will study Namaste’s students to determine if they experience long-term results, such as reduced body mass index measurements.

For Slade, there’s no question that the program is working wonders. “Today Melodi Huff, age 6, told me that she and her friend ‘solved their problem peacefully.’ Those little moments tell me that everything we believe in works for kids,” says Slade. “Now I say proudly, ‘I’m a teacher.’ I don’t think I’ll ever do anything else.”

By Jennifer Wulff. Barbara Sandler in Chicago

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PHYS ED?

Gym class used to be a daily staple at public schools. But shrinking budgets and new emphasis on academic testing have changed that. Between 1991 and 1999, the number of students taking P.E. every day dropped from 42% to 29%, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. And a study by the Institute of Medicine last October found that only eight percent of the nation’s elementary schools offer gym on a daily basis. Even recess has been abolished at many schools. “While we’re worrying about reading and writing,” says Dr. Thomas Templin, president of the National Association for Health and Physical Education, “we should also be worrying about the health of our kids.”



Many of Namaste’s students, like Yadira Saldierna, 5, learn both English and Spanish.