

http://www.wiscnews.com/portagedailyregister/news/local/article_d40940de-e0cc-57fc-b028-53149467f850.html

TOP STORY

Don't sit: S.M.A.R.T. teachers get kids on the move

NOAH VERNAU nvernau@wiscnews.com Jun 29, 2017



4K educators from across the state tap their knees with plastic plates Thursday during S.M.A.R.T. workshops at Cooperative Education Service Agency 5 (CESA 5) in Portage.

NOAH VERNAU/Daily Register

Some leaders in education say that in order to understand the emphasis on body movement and brain stimulation in young children, you need to understand the climate in schools and homes that make it so necessary.

Children are getting more “screen time,” whether that’s the computer, cellphone or TV. They’re indoors. Their parents are busy. Their teachers are swamped with testing benchmarks.

What’s the result of these trends?

Sitting.

“Our principle,” Jessica McFarland said, “is movement anchors learning.”

McFarland is the assistant director of Minnesota Learning Resource Center, the teacher training institute of the brain-centered nonprofit organization, A Chance to Grow. MLRC on Thursday in Portage completed three days of S.M.A.R.T. classes and activities based on research about early childhood brain stimulation.

The workshops for 4K educators were hosted for the second straight year by Cooperative Education Service Agency 5, which provides services and support to 35 public school districts in South Central Wisconsin.

S.M.A.R.T. — Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training — is currently used in about 300 4K, kindergarten and elementary classrooms in 13 states. MLRC has trained more than 6,000 teachers since 2000, McFarland estimated, and it has no intentions of slowing down.

“It goes back to the basics,” McFarland said, just a few minutes before 30 Wisconsin educators practiced a “movement break” in a workshop led by S.M.A.R.T. presenter Kristi Edmonds. Music began playing, and the teachers picked up small, plastic plates — moving them, slapping them to the beat. Activities like that are what leaders hope workshop participants bring into their classrooms, to get kids moving.

“All of our activities mimic what should already be happening in development,” McFarland said.

“Most parents,” Edmonds said, “would be surprised to know that doing these big, gross, motor activities are really going to have an impact later in life, when (children are) learning how to read, write and manipulate small objects with their fine motor skills.”

‘Container babies’

This week’s program in Portage brought 30 educators from school districts like Cambria-Friesland, Reedsburg, Randolph, Clintonville, Waupaca and Wautoma, among several others.

They participated in activities like crawling on the “slap track” — which is a big shower curtain that has shapes and colors on it, explained Heather Fish, the director of School Improvement Services at CESA 5. The slap track was developed for “container babies,” those who’d spent too much time being immobile, to the point where they never learned to crawl.

On the slap track they hit informational cards — squares, rectangles — as they move along. The absence of crawling skills is more common than you might expect, Fish said.

“Container babies don’t have the core strength to crawl, and we know that’s linked to poor reading.”

‘Fantastic things happen’

Another activity learned this week, explained by Edmonds, is called “pencil rolls.” The kids lie flat on a mat, feet together, and they begin rolling “as fast as they can, as flat as they can,” to develop their “whole-body, tactile stimulation.”

Fish explained an activity where students put glue dots along the outlines of numbers, so they can trace them with their fingers. Any activity that's "a little more active," or "engaging" is shown to enhance learning, she said.

Educators this week could also be seen stacking dice with tweezers, walking "heel to toe" — and they even did some old-school hopscotch.

It's not a coincidence, everyone agreed, that the most common theme among the teachers trying out these activities was laughing and smiling. That's a big part of the point.

"When you get kids moving," Fish said, "some fantastic things happen."

While S.M.A.R.T. activities are geared toward 4K and elementary age students, Fish added, they're activities that "translate across all age groups."

"Anyone can use them throughout their whole education experience."

Too many tests

The emphasis on testing in schools affects all grade levels — even in 4K. S.M.A.R.T. activities aren't "your standard form test," Fish said, but they are tests all the same.

"I like to think of them as another assessment," she said of S.M.A.R.T. Teachers face "an overwhelming demand" regarding the implementation of the "necessary curriculum" — and that naturally creates the tendency, for some, to look past the more fundamental abilities in children.

S.M.A.R.T. isn't the only program that emphasizes movement, Fish noted. Far from it. "Teachers across the U.S. are doing some amazing things," she said. "So this is just a matter of getting more people (involved)."

While the trends that are keeping too many kids indoors and immobile are troubling, all of the educators Thursday said they believe momentum is on their side.

“Teachers are realizing something’s missing (in their classrooms),” McFarland said, calling the increase in testing mandates across the U.S. a “roadblock” to the teaching or enhancing of fundamental movement skills.

“There’s always that pressure (for teachers) to meet the curriculum in order to move on.”

Debbie Klinger, an early childhood teacher in the Wautoma School District, has been in education for 33 years and said there is “definitely” more testing in 4K and kindergarten than ever before. She remembers a time when there was “a lot more” outdoor play and when “movement was just more accepted” in the classrooms.

“4K is what kindergarten was; kindergarten is what first grade used to be,” she said of curriculum.

‘Bodies and brains’

Brain research regarding movement is a “big thing right now” in academics, especially at a time when more schools – stretched for funds – have reduced physical education, art, music and even recess time, McFarland said.

Plentiful research has become available in recent years regarding movement, from many respected entities. McFarland recommends interested parents or educators look into the research the American Academy of Pediatrics has done regarding screen time, for example.

Leslie Giese, an MLRC trainer, said it’s common sense that an increase in testing along with more technology being introduced in classrooms leads to less movement than in past years.

“We’re kind of forgetting the typical childhood experiences that kids miss (today),” she said.

The bottom line, McFarland said, is MLRC recognizes that more kids are coming into schools with “bodies and brains unprepared for learning.”

“The primary thing we want parents and educators to understand is, kids need stimulating activity – they need an enriching sensory experience.”

For more information about S.M.A.R.T., visit ACTG.org.

“The primary thing we want parents and educators to understand is, kids need stimulating activity – they need an enriching sensory experience.” – Jessica McFarland, Minnesota Learning Resource Center

Follow Noah Vernau on Twitter @NoahVernau

“The primary thing we want parents and educators to understand is, kids need stimulating activity – they need an enriching sensory experience.”

-- Jessica McFarland, Minnesota Learning Resource Center

Noah Vernau

Portage Daily Register reporter

