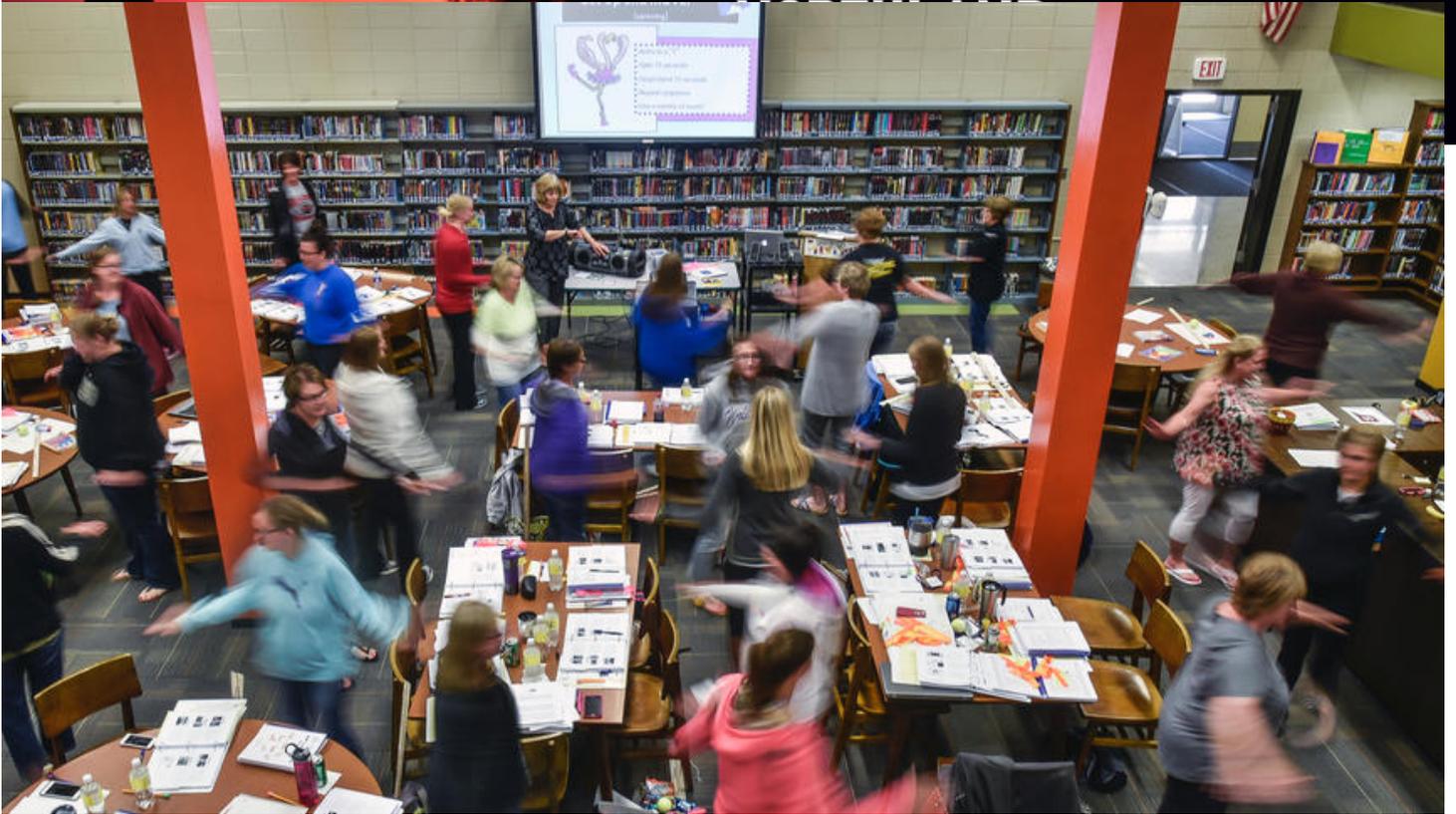


Staying S.M.A.R.T. in Mitchell

Sara Bertsch

# A FRESH CATCH OF OUTDOOR NEWS & INFO



Educators do helicopter spins part of a workshop called The Smart Program being led by Leslie Giese, top center, with the Minnesota Learning Resource Center on Wednesday afternoon in the media center at Mitchell Middle School. The purpose of the helicopter spins are to encourage body awareness. (Matt Gade/Republic)

When Susan Dodd first received training for the S.M.A.R.T. program 11 years ago, she didn't realize that she would be using these same skills every day in her classroom to this day.

Dodd, a first-grade teacher at Gertie Belle Rogers Elementary in Mitchell, said she has seen a lot of success in her classroom using the S.M.A.R.T. program techniques. S.M.A.R.T. stands for Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training.

Now, 55 more teachers from nine different school districts in the Mitchell area can use the same techniques after attending a three-day workshop Tuesday, Wednesday and today at Mitchell Middle School.

The training teaches educators how physical movement and activities can stimulate a child's brain and enhance classroom learning.

"It's out there and it's a brain stimulation program," said Leslie Giese, S.M.A.R.T. presenter and mentor for the Minnesota Learning Resource Center, or MLRC. "What we're trying to do is help kids mature and develop the brain connections and, especially, stimulate the brain stem where a lot of automatic functions should be taking place."

The program was created by the MLRC, a nationally recognized teacher-training institute affiliated with A Chance to Grow, a Minnesota-based nonprofit organization.

Giese said that the training provides a hands-on experience for teachers to learn and try the activities they will incorporate into their classrooms.

For example, some of the activities target auditory skills and help kids with listening. Giese said some kids cannot distinguish between different phonetic sounds, and the activities geared toward this skillset can help develop their auditory system.

This is just one of many areas the S.M.A.R.T. workshop covers. Giese said the training also works with balance, movement, hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills.

"They do activities that get the brain and the body ready to learn," Giese said. "We do purposeful, specific movements that are going to help build more neuron connections and myelination. When there's more myelination, the brain moves quicker. So that's what we're after: an efficient, quick brain."

One such activity is called the Pencil Roll. Students make the shape of the pencil with their hands and legs while rolling on the ground. According to Giese, while rolling they are stimulating the semicircular canals in their ears, helping them with balance.

Another activity is called the Alligator Crawl, which has students crawl on their belly using both sides of their body. While doing this, Geise said the students' left and right hemispheres of the brain are "talking to one another" making connections.

For Dodd, she would like to help her students become more efficient with fine motor skills. She said that, now, many kids are losing these skills because they are spending more of their time on cellphones, tablets and watching television.

"Because they are spending so much time in front of a screen, they're losing their fine motor skills," Dodd said.

Simple activities, such as hopscotch, are what kids need to be doing instead of having so much screen time, according to Dodd. Giese agreed.

"They are watching a lot of TV, they are on their iPads, computer screens and they aren't doing typical child development-type activities," Giese said.

S.M.A.R.T. has several different programs for the Pre-K age group and an elementary age group, but Giese said that the techniques can be applied to all ages.

Teachers from preschool to middle school and music, and even an occupational therapist all participated in the workshop this week. Giese said that this is the fifth time that the MLRC has provided S.M.A.R.T. trainings in Mitchell.

"We help (educators) understand the connection with their teaching and with the development of the brain," Geise said. "And we help them understand that movement anchors learning in little kids."

First-grade teacher Jennifer Larson is excited to begin using the skills she's learned at the workshop in her classroom this fall at Sanborn Central Elementary School.

She plans to use bits and pieces to mix into her curriculum.

"I love it," Larson said. "It's very hands-on to develop visual, tactile and auditory skills, as well as other skills."

This was Larson's first time taking the training, and she said she's glad she participated. Now, Larson, along with all of the other workshop participants, have resources ready to go when they go back to school.

Sarah Jensen, a first-grade teacher at Woonsocket Elementary School in Woonsocket, said the curriculum will be easy to implement.

"It's not something you necessarily have to take a half hour out of your day to do," Jensen said. "There's been some aha moments. They've been giving us ideas for kids who do not have their senses developed at the right time."

The S.M.A.R.T. workshops were funded by the Carol M. White Physical Education Program Grant, a federally funded grant program designed to help schools and community-based organizations enhance physical education programs for K-12 students.

Dodd, along with many other teachers who have participated in the S.M.A.R.T. training, is a firm believer in the results the curriculum brings.

"This is the coolest thing," Dodd said about her students using the movement curriculum. "You can already see this spark in their eye and they are so on task and ready to go."

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