



ONLINE PE WORKS OUT FOR MANY STUDENTS

By Scott Travis Education Writer
23 June 2003

With a high school schedule loaded with magnet and advanced placement classes, Lynda Figueredo had no time for physical education class.

Another student, Jenna Heyman, dislikes team sports. She feels self-conscious about exercising in a group setting, so a traditional PE class didn't work for her, either.

Lacey Angelocci likes sports, but she doesn't like dressing out during the school day.

The three South Florida teens have found a class that meets their needs -- online PE.

"At first, I thought, 'Online PE. That's kind of weird,'" said Figueredo, 16, who lives west of Boca Raton and attends Dreyfoos School of the Arts in West Palm Beach. "But I think it's better than taking it in school. I can do it on my own time and at my own pace."

As unusual as it sounds, online PE is becoming one of the most popular virtual classes offered for high school students in Florida. Enrollment has doubled every year since it began in 1999, this year serving 1,700 students statewide.

Students must take PE to graduate, but many said they'd rather spend their school day taking classes that are more crucial to academic success. So during the summer, or in their spare time during the school year, they use their computers to take PE.

VIRTUAL SCHOOL

It's part of a growing trend of schools using online learning to help offer more flexibility to students. Statewide, about 11,000 students take classes through the Florida Virtual School, the largest provider of online courses in the state. The Legislature pays for the program, allowing the classes to be free for students in the state. The demand is so great that the Broward County School District has duplicated the programs, hiring its own teachers for online PE as well as math, English, history and other courses.

Of 613 students enrolled in Florida Virtual School programs in Palm Beach County, 119 are taking PE courses. In Broward County, 122 students are taking such a class either through the state or the county.

But the concept troubles some, who question how effective a PE class can be if there are no group activities or no face-to-face contact with the instructor.

"I can see the benefits of students who have huge load with a lot of advanced classes," said Linda Cowart, a physical education and athletics planner for the Palm Beach County School District. "But the problem is you never really know if they're doing what's being asked on the Internet."

Cowart said she believes the only way such a class would be effective is if students exercised with heart monitors that could be analyzed by a teacher in a remote location.

But online educators insist the program is effective. They say they have safeguards to help prevent students from cheating.

The class is also popular with overweight children or those who don't like to play sports such as softball or flag football. Heyman, a sophomore at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, would rather swim in her home pool or use a stair stepper at her house. She has taken two P.E. classes, Personal Fitness and Fitness Lifestyle Design, during the past year.

"I feel more comfortable doing my own personal workouts, setting my own goals," Heyman said. "I knew online, I'd have a better workout environment."

Figueredo, who is taking her second semester of online PE, likes to jog and do aerobics.

Students learn exercise techniques and health information through a computer. They are required to do an exercise of their choice. They must log their eating and exercise habits, as well as their heart rates. Their parents must sign off on their work. The students also talk by e-mail and telephone to their instructor.

If students aren't actually working out, they're going to have a hard time filling out their logs, said Jo Wagner, an online PE teacher for Florida Virtual School.

Cowart is more skeptical, saying any student can figure out an individual target heart rate by doing some simple mathematical equations.

LIMITATIONS

But Wagner, who lives in Fort Myers, said she usually can figure out who is telling the truth when she talks to students. She also telephones and e-mails parents.

"The parents are very honest about whether their kids have been working out," Wagner said. "It's actually been a neat way to see families connect or reconnect around a common goal of fitness and nutrition."

Judith Young, executive director of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education sees limitations to such a class.

"Part of physical education has to do with teamworking and interacting with others," she said. "That's hard to do with a computer."

Wagner said some students take online PE thinking it's an easy grade. They quickly learn that they are required to read 11 chapters of material, complete 34 written assignments and take several quizzes and tests during a semester. She said the class isn't for everyone, but it's ideal for some students.

"Kids have told me they have to work harder than they do in school," she said. "But they like the choices they are given. They don't have to dress out in front of others in school, and they can focus on what their goal is."

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