

Virtual PE makes a splash; Online fitness courses let the kids sweat at home while earning school credit

Scott Brooks
12 August 2003

Lina Ceron's gym class is just like any other, except that it has no walls and no whistles.

She and other Florida high schoolers are staying fit this summer, and earning physical education credits, without the watchful eye of a teacher to keep them on track. All they need is a connection to the Internet and a little self-discipline.

Too busy, or just too shy, for traditional gym class, hundreds of students across the state have enrolled in online fitness courses. Taking tips from textbook readings and an online gym coach, they can create their own workouts and log their results in cyberspace, all on their own time and from the comfort of home.

It takes discipline

"You have to be disciplined, but it works," says Ceron, who is going into her junior year at Barron Collier High School in Naples, Fla.

"We've found these kids have really made lifestyle changes," says Julie Young, executive director of the Florida Virtual School, the state-funded public high school that pioneered the program. The school provides access to courses not available everywhere; Florida public school students can enroll at no extra cost.

Though colleges have been offering online PE for years, Florida is the first state to adopt an online program for high schools, she says. Its online PE course is franchised to districts in Kansas, Ohio, Wisconsin and Texas.

Young predicts other parts of the country will soon pick up on it. More than 160 students in schools across the state are earning online gym credits this summer, and another 90 are enrolled in a spin-off program offered by the Broward County school district, which has its own online instructor but also uses the franchised course content. Last year, Florida Virtual enrolled about 1,600 high schoolers in online PE.

The course involves more than just clicking a mouse. Students are expected to work out three or four times a week, and they must report their progress on the Web. Each course has an instructor, fully wired to give advice and answer student questions throughout the day by e-mail, instant message, phone or fax.

More varied activities

At the same time, students are asked to read up on fitness and nutrition and complete regular written assignments. The course can take a student as much as six to 10 hours a week, instructors say.

As a freshman, Ceron's in-school gym class did outdoor exercises under the noontime Florida sun. Now, she works out in the mornings and evenings, when the heat is less punishing, and frequently opts for a workout in her own swimming pool.

Other students have managed to turn their hobbies into high school credit, getting their workouts from dancing, surfing, biking or yoga.

"This is not a roll-out-the-ball type of class," says Tim Maxwell, who teaches online high school courses in personal fitness and fitness lifestyle and design in Broward County.

That's just the point for some high schoolers, who hope to avoid the social nightmares sometimes associated with traditional PE. With online fitness, there are no locker-room showers, no school-day sweating, no humiliation for less athletic students.

"When you can sweat in private and not have to be concerned about peer pressure, about what you look like in a PE uniform, it's amazing what you can accomplish," Young says.

Other students, such as Christina DePasquale of Coral Springs High School, are taking the online summer session to keep mandatory PE credits from clogging up their academic schedules come fall. DePasquale, who will be a senior this fall, plans to take three Advanced Placement courses while filling leadership slots in National Honor Society and the school's senior class.

This summer, she's taking PE while vacationing with her family in Oregon. "It's really convenient. I can just go online whenever I want," she says.

She and other students concede it would not be too hard for a student to cheat, even though Virtual School instructors speak monthly with each student's parents by phone and require that they sign their children's workout logs.

Some parents have called to tattle on kids who were goofing off when they should have been working out, says Virtual School PE instructor Jo Wagner.

Logs minimize cheating

Mostly, though, Wagner and other instructors say they would know if students were cheating. Workout logs require students to report hard numbers, such as their heart rate, during key points of a workout.

"It's very easy from the questions we ask to tell if they are doing the work or not," Wagner says. And if they aren't, she adds, "I call them on it."

Judith Young, executive director of the non-profit National Association for Sport and Physical Education, an organization for fitness professionals, says online physical education should supplement in-class learning, not replace it. Still, it has certain advantages, particularly for students who wouldn't otherwise work out.

"If we can convince kids to be taking some responsibility for their own levels of health in non-school time, they may be more likely to incorporate it in their outside life," she says.