



All Things Considered

Profile: Online physical education courses in Florida

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MELISSA BLOCK, host:

For many people, going online involves nothing more strenuous than clicking a mouse. But in Florida, high school students are using their computers to work up a sweat. Physical education courses are being offered in cyberspace, complete with an online gym teacher. Despite some skepticism, teachers and students involved say it's just as tough as gym class in school. NPR's Phillip Davis has this report.

PHILLIP DAVIS reporting:

Seventeen-year-old Cara Chessel(ph) never hated gym class. It's just that with four AP honors classes and with volleyball practice, it was tough to squeeze in the required PE course. So now, from the comfort of her home in Deerfield Beach, she takes an online course called Fitness Lifestyle and Design. She thinks it's great.

CARA CHESSEL (Student): Here, it's a lot of freedom of what you can wear and when you can do it. I mean, I do it a lot of the times on the weekends or late after school, like, after all my activities are over. So it's really just very convenient

DAVIS: She fires up the family computer and various modules pop up on the screen.

CHESSEL: This one is just the basic overview--it's the first module--telling you what you're going to be doing. And in the second module, there's a fitness analysis. They want you to do an initial, like, testing, you know, to see what--they give you standards for where you should be at your age.

DAVIS: Students are required to do one to one and a half hours of physical activity per week, but they're allowed to pick and choose their own activity. Chessel, for examples, warms up with jump rope...

(Soundbite of Chessel jumping rope)

DAVIS: ...does a few stretches and then often a jog or a 30-minute bike ride through the neighborhood. Students are required to keep detailed logs of their activities. And to keep them honest, they have to be signed by the parents.

CHESSEL: I'd say that your parents play a really important role. And if they see you cheating and they don't want you cheating, then--I mean, they're always there watching out over you.

DAVIS: Chessel's progress is monitored virtually by Jo Wagner, a phys ed instructor who lives in Ft. Myers, all the way on the other side of the state. She's one of 17 online PE instructors in Florida. She's done it for three years after teaching traditional PE for nearly two decades.

Ms. JO WAGNER (Online PE Instructor): Every physical education teacher that I have talked with is skeptical. And to be real honest with you, I was skeptical about how it worked. However, once I saw the checks-and-balances system and the quality of the assignments that the kids have to do and the active engagement--they have to participate in this class.

DAVIS: But it is not for everyone. Wagner says students taking the class must be self-motivated and ready to do numerous written assignments as well as the physical workouts. Wagner talks to each student at least once a week and e-mails them more frequently, getting to know them better, she says, than she would have had she been in a traditional course of a similar size at a high school.

The course is just one of a wide range of classes designed and administered by the Florida Virtual School, a state-chartered school based in Orlando. It was founded to provide students access to courses that they might not have been able to get at a local school. Julie Young, Florida Virtual School's CEO, says online physical education is one of their most popular offerings.

Ms. JULIE YOUNG (CEO, Florida Virtual School): Because it's probably one of the most inconvenient classes for kids to take at school. Number one, there are usually large numbers of students on the field at one time. And many kids are not athletically inclined and, therefore, it's not particularly one of those courses that kids get real excited about taking at school.

DAVIS: More than 4,300 students signed up for online phys ed this year. The advantage for those students is that they can work at their own pace and master the material on their own, she says, while being monitored by parents and adults.

Critics of the plan are not sure if that's enough. Charlene Burgeson is executive director of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education.

Ms. CHARLENE BURGESON (Executive Director, National Association for Sport and Physical Education): One of the disadvantages is that teachers are not there to provide personalized feedback about what they're seeing if something is being performed incorrectly. They're not there to make those corrections, and so you're taking the risk that kids are actually learning something and performing it in such a way that is not the ideal way to do it.

DAVIS: But Burgeson says the association is not calling for virtual physical education to be abolished. In these days in which physical education is often subject to budget cuts and limitations because of overcrowded classrooms, Burgeson says any workout is better than no workout at all. Phillip Davis, NPR News, Miami.