



Time, Patience, and Persistence: Making Physical Activity a Part of Your School Culture

Story by Angela Stark

Physical activity benefits students' mental, emotional, and physical wellness as well as their academic outcomes by improving focus, retention of information, concentration, and on-task behaviors. Despite this, I've seen that not everyone believes in the importance of having physical activity in the classroom: *It's different. It's not the norm. It takes away from learning.* How do you change a school's culture so that physical activity is seen as something to enhance learning rather than an extra burden?

For me, I have only ever had positive experiences including physical activity in my classroom and at my school. My students love coming to my class because they know they will have an opportunity to move.

But my journey as a physical activity leader wasn't always easy. It has taken several years to change my school's culture, but it is completely worth it. I changed the mindsets of my fellow teachers by being a role model. If I expected other teachers to do energizers, I had to model the activities myself and teach them *how* to do an energizer. For a lot of teachers, leading an energizer may be brand new, or they think it's taking time away from learning. What I know, and what I try to show my teachers every day, is that physical activity doesn't mean stopping class to move; it's about energizing our students' brains for increased learning.

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So, how do you change teachers' mindsets? I've tried a few strategies, including:

- Modeling movement breaks in my own class.
- Educating teachers on how it will benefit their teaching and their students' learning.
- Leading a different brain energizer in every faculty meeting.
- Teaching teachers how to use physical activity (e.g., gallery walks, movement based lessons) to teach a new concept.

Changing mindsets is just the first step. But the big question is how to make these changes at your own school so that physical activity becomes a part of your school's culture.



First, you have to remember that it takes time, patience, and persistence. It's taken me years to build up my school's culture, so start small and make your way through these suggestions one by one:

- **Join the [Healthy Schools Program](#)** from the [Alliance for Healthier Generation](#).
- **Create a Wellness Committee** that includes parents, students, staff, and administrators.
- **Start trying new resources** in your own class and teach your students about the benefits of physical activity.
- **Educate staff in faculty meetings** and provide them resources for brain energizers and ways to teach their lessons using physical activity. I created my own [YouTube channel](#) with brain energizers so staff could easily do them, especially if they were scared leading an energizer the first few times.
- **Find opportunities in your school day to increase physical activity.** At my school, students sit in the multipurpose room every morning after they arrive. Why not get kids moving? Now, our students walk or play other games like four square or jump rope.
- **If you have the funds or community support,** purchase [bouncy bands](#) for all of the chairs in the math and science rooms to allow students to move throughout the lessons.
- **Advocate for policies that support physical activity.** Using our wellness policy and parent meetings, I advocated for recess for both elementary and middle school students. Elementary now has 20 minutes of recess every day and middle school has five minutes (it's a start, right?). When we return to in-person learning, middle school students will have 10 minutes of recess every day!

Since adding more physical activity to our school day, students seem happier and love being able to move. Our school has seen test scores rise and behavior problems decrease.

After 5 years, teachers see how physical activity positively impacts our students' health, behavior, and academics. The unexpected outcome for my staff is how physical activity during the day positively impacts their own physical, mental, and emotional health.

As for parents, parents are my biggest advocates. Every year I educate the new families about our school's physical activity culture and the benefits for their kids. Our families absolutely love that their children get to move throughout the day rather than sitting for 7-8 hours. In fact, it's our parents who are always trying to find new ways for us to add more physical activity to the school day. Win!

My favorite ways to incorporate physical activity in your classroom

- [GoNoodle](#)
- YouTube videos (search Just Dance videos or Physical Activity breaks)
- Take your class for a walk outside around the building.
- Do a gallery walk in your class.
- Do collaborative work where students are up and have to switch stations.
- Have students do partner work while standing up.
- Purchase active seating (I purchased Ergo seating through www.movingminds.org)
- Raise the tables in your classroom, if you're able, to create stand-up desks.
- Search online. There are a lot of ways to do brain energizers in your classroom.
- Play a game such as Simon Says or Rock, Paper, Scissors. For Rock, Paper, Scissors students stand and play against the teacher. For example, if they beat you, they do 10 squats; if they tie, 10 jumping jacks; or if they lose, 10 lunges.

Check out additional resources on incorporating physical activity in your classroom from [Active Schools partners](#) and [Springboard to Active Schools](#) during [Active Classrooms Month](#).

Angela Stark is a PE/Health Teacher at the School for the Creative Performing Arts (SCAPA) in Lexington, KY. She was the 2016 KY Secondary PE Teacher of the Year and the 2017 Southern District Middle School Teacher of the Year. Her school was just named a National Healthy School Silver Level Awardee for the 2020-2021 school year. Follow her on Twitter @healthystark.

