A School on the Move – Literally

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When two Ed School alums, Thomas Bean, Ed.M.'81, and A. Kevin Qazilbash, Ed.M.'98, met in 2010, you could say that sparks flew. After all, a few short years later, the two educators and a third partner in the project, Sarah Peteraf, started Spark Academy, a middle school that is gradually replacing one of the worst-performing middle schools in Lawrence, Mass., a city with such low-performing schools that they were placed in receivership in 2012.

The school is not a charter school; it is just a normal, public middle school for students in fifth and sixth grades who live in South Lawrence. (It will add another grade each year until it serves fifth- through eighth-graders.) But Spark Academy differs from a typical public middle school in a big way: Each day, students get three physical activity periods for a total of about two hours of gym.

Bean, a lawyer who says his passion is education, serves as an adviser and fundraiser for the school. He says that having kids run around in between periods of learning just makes sense.

"It's so counterintuitive that 11-year-olds are sitting at desks all day," he says. "Here, kids are doing what kids are supposed to be doing — running and learning, playing hard, and working hard."

Not surprisingly, Qazilbash, or "Principal Q," as the students call him, agrees. He paraphrases a common notion that modern Americans are urban dwellers stuck in hunter/gatherer bodies, meaning the way people live doesn't allow them to get the exercise their bodies crave, particularly teens.

"People should be at their most active as teenagers. The physiology of most people aligns with that," he says.

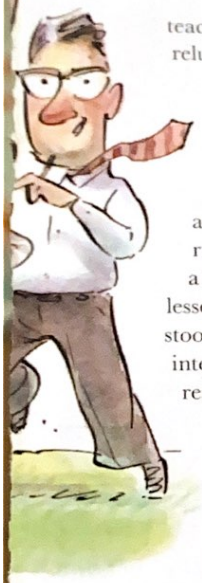
Research supports this idea. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently published a report on school-based exercise and academic performance. The authors wrote that, overall, the results of 46 articles published between 1985 and October 2008 found that "there is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores. … The articles in this review suggest that physical activity can have an impact on cognitive skills and attitudes and academic behavior, all of which are important components of improved academic performance."

To get more specific, "one study that we often cite has shown that running for 20 minutes allows people to learn vocabulary words 20 percent faster," Peteraf, the school's vice principal, writes in an email. "Another showed that students in Cambridge who passed more fitness tests performed better both on standardized testing as well as in their grades, holding all other variables constant."

Of course, all this exercise should also have a positive effect on the "not-so-small problem with childhood obesity," as Bean calls it. According to a report by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health published in 2010, Lawrence needs help in this area; the city has the highest rate of obesity in Massachusetts. However, all that time devoted to exercise won't help kids if they won't participate. What happens to the kids who just say no to joining in at the gym? So far, that hasn't been a problem. Qazilbash has a few thoughts for why this potential stumbling block hasn't tripped them up at Spark.

"We survey kids and ask them what is fun, and they get things they want. Also, we get them when they are fifth-graders, when they will try anything," he says. "They don't question it. They think of themselves as athletes, people who move."

Qazilbash also credits the physical education staff, whom he calls "vivacious" and "energetic," and he notes that there are about 12 kids to every one P.E. teacher or associate



teacher-coach, so the teachers can spend the time motivating any reluctant exercisers.

Activity isn't just for the gym, either. Teachers have the students do "sparks" throughout the day, where the students get up in the middle of the class and take movement breaks. Teachers and administrators think these are particularly important since academic class periods can last an hour and 20 minutes, and the school day is an extended one, running for eight hours Monday through Thursday and six and a half hours on Fridays. Sometimes the sparks are built into the lessons, such as a science class one morning where the students stood up and those representing gas particles vibrated with a lot of intensity, those representing liquids moved a little, and those representing solids basically stood still. In another class, an English teacher, Maggie Simeone, Ed.M.'13, had the students imitate her morning routine, making them run in place as she ran to make coffee.

Just as the gym comes into the classroom, once a week the academic teachers go into the gym, participating in the activities with their students. Simeone enjoys her time in the gym, saying it allows the students to "see a sillier side of me and lets me see a different side of them, too. Plus it's just fun to play soccer in the gym."

Another way the classroom and the gym meet is that the school's principles are prevalent in both places. For example, one principle, "always try," helps the students and the teachers take on assignments or sports that may be tough for them. Simeone thinks that "always try" is what gets students who might be reluctant about sports out onto the court or field. Plus, having consistent principles that are applied by every teacher and administrator throughout the school makes for a positive work environment.

"The kids seem really happy. There's a peacefulness throughout the day that I did not feel in the other school system I taught in," Simeone says, referring to time she spent teaching in Houston.

Whether that peacefulness comes from students getting energy out in the gym, or from having consistent principles to count on, something is working. Teachers like Simeone notice it, and test results show it, too. In the fall, a month into the school year, only the preliminary MCAS scores were public, but Qazilbash says that the fifth-graders scored higher in math and science than any fifth-grade class that came before them in what was then South Lawrence East Middle School.

"That being said, we still have a long way to go to help all of our students reach their true academic potential," he says. Though that may be true, he and the rest of the Spark Academy staff are certainly getting off on the right (sneakered) foot.

— Christine Junge is a freelance writer and a writing specialist at Emmanuel College. She wishes she had gone to a school like Spark Academy.

Seeing Green (Mountains)

Current doctoral student Rebecca Holcombe, Ed.M.'90, was named education secretary for the state of Vermont by Governor Peter Shumlin to begin in January. Holcombe is a lecturer and director of the Dartmouth Teacher Education Program at Dartmouth College, and prior to that, she served as a principal in Vermont and a teacher in New Hampshire.