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Healthy experiment

New school builds learning around exercise, nutrition

By Patrice M. Jones
Tribune staff reporter

The pint-size children stretch their arms skyward, "like a starfish" the teacher instructs, as New Age music fills the sun-drenched room.

"Notice your body. Notice your heart. Notice your lungs filling with air," says teacher Abby Rose, as a roomful of kindergartners and 1st graders do their best stretching poses. "Take a moment and think of all the things you need to do today to have a really great day."

The early morning exercise session, more typical of midspredding, middle-age adults rather than a workout for 5- and 6-year-olds, is the way every day begins at Chicago's Namaste Charter School.

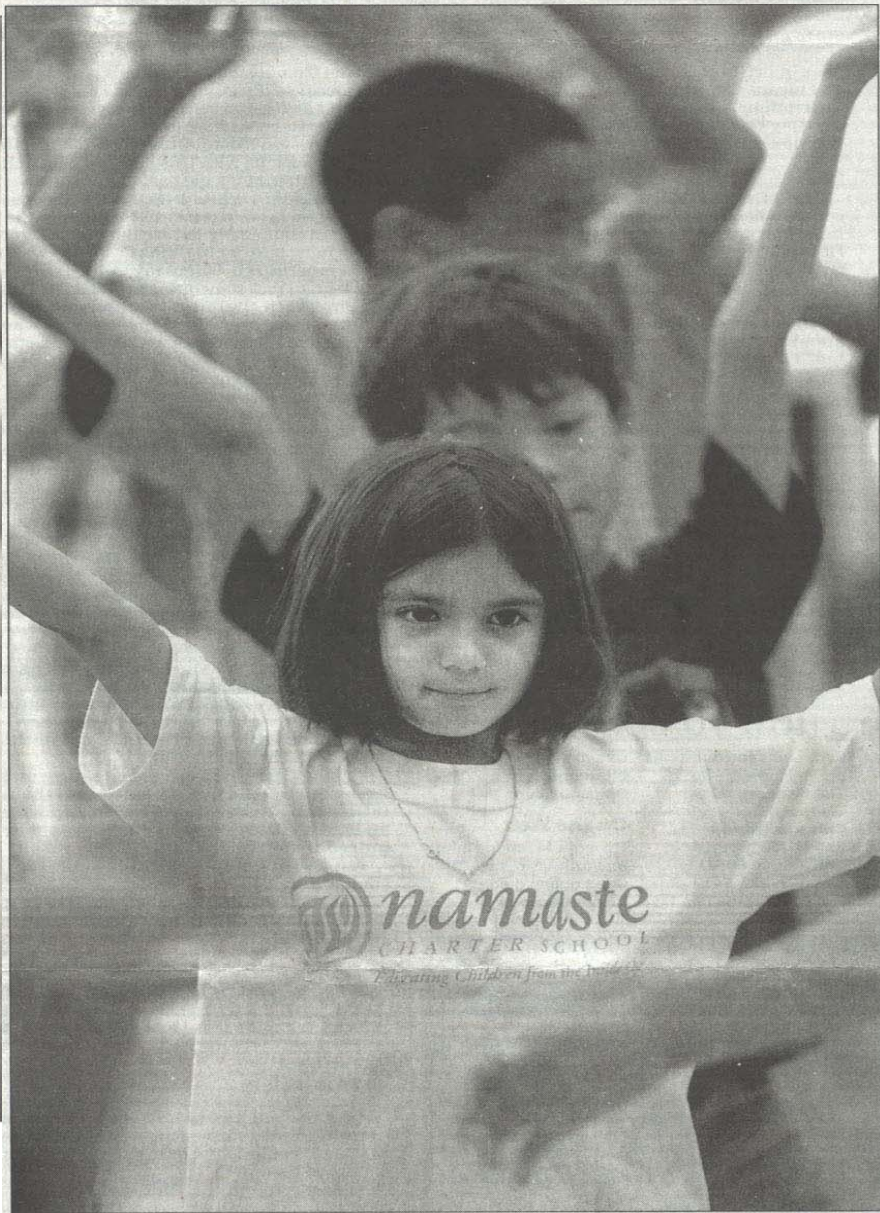
After walking to school with parent volunteers and eating a healthy breakfast featuring yogurt, sugarless cereal and fruit, the children at this tiny Southwest Side school incorporate movement throughout their school day.

It is an experiment in bringing healthy lifestyles to the classroom that is being watched by educators and others across the nation. The start-up elementary with only 90 students, which will end its first academic year on July 22, is one of the most aggressive efforts to date to attack the growing problem of childhood obesity.

"A lot of places are cutting recess and physical education because they believe it is taking time away from academics," said Namaste Principal Allison Slade, a marathon runner and former synchronized swimmer who worked with a team to develop the school's unique focus.

"But for us, physical fitness is directly related to academic performance," said Slade, who also co-founded the school.

Educators across the nation have been debating the fate of physical education programs in recent years as budget cuts and an increasing barrage of stricter academic standards have made fitting activity into the public school day more and more difficult.



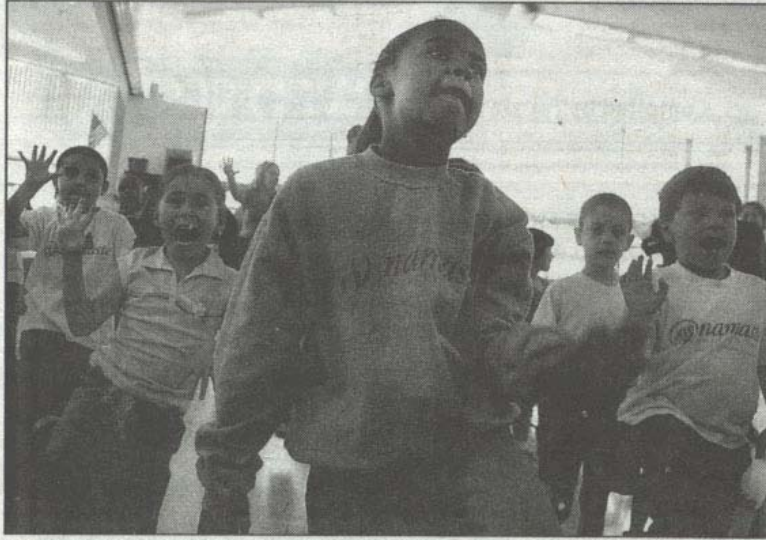
Tribune photos by Charles Osgood

Pricella Mier (above) and other students at Namaste Charter School participate in their morning stretches before classes begin. Michelle Ramirez (right) and her son, Gabriel, at the weekly parent-child-teacher breakfast.



Food for thought

- **Name:** Namaste (pronounced na-ma-STAY) Charter School
- **Address:** 3540 S. Hermitage Ave.
- **What:** Charter school with a focus on integrating physical fitness and good nutrition as core components of its academic curriculum. Opened in August 2004. This academic year will end July 22. School will resume Aug. 29. The year-round school also has a four-week break in December and a three-week break in April.
- **Who:** Student enrollment will swell to 150 this fall. The school, which this year will add 2nd grade, will add a grade each year and eventually will include kindergarten through 8th grade and serve 450 students.
- **Typical lunch:** A child could pick four or five foods from the following menu — baked chicken, carrots, tossed salad, fresh fruit, milk, animal crackers. A salad bar includes, for instance, lettuce, broccoli, tomatoes, cucumbers, celery sticks, carrot sticks, corn, bean sprouts, green beans, pineapple, raisins, eggs, turkey, diced ham and cottage cheese.
- **Special classes:** Bilingual education, nutrition education and physical fitness scattered throughout the school day.



Kennedy Townsend, 6, and classmates exercise before class.

NAMASTE: Its efforts are being studied

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Meanwhile, a 2003 study released by the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children (CLOCC) found that youngsters in Chicago were more than two times likely to be overweight than children nationwide.

The study showed that height and weight data from physical exam forms in 30 Chicago public schools revealed that 23 percent of prekindergarten and kindergarten students were overweight. The national average was 10 percent.

Illinois requires that public school students take gym class daily. But in the past decade, about a quarter of all school districts have received waivers to those requirements.

Many schools also have cut re-

cess, citing the need for more time for academic instruction and safety concerns.

Bucking the trend, Slade and her small staff of teachers at Namaste have focused on what they call a holistic approach.

The word *namaste* is a Hindi greeting that roughly translated means "my inner light salutes your inner light."

Children, who are served breakfast and lunch, are encouraged to choose food from the four food groups in appropriate portion sizes. A salad bar also is offered every day.

Bilingual emphasis

The school also has a longer day, an emphasis on bilingual education, an early exposure to math and science, and a focus on parental involvement.

Slade, 29, a former teacher with a master's degree in education policy from the University of Chicago, said she long believed there were many barriers that kept students from achieving academically. "I felt as if kids could definitely do better if they didn't eat Pop Tarts for breakfast and hit a sugar high at 10 and then not be able to work from 10 until noon," she said.

In 2003, Slade helped lead a



Tribune photos by Charles Osgood

A class on the preparation of healthy foods is presented to parents of Namaste Charter School by (from far right) Sylvia Klinger, educational assistant Alison Solow and Klinger's 10-year-old daughter, Katharine. The school works to promote health and fitness.

successful charter school proposal for Namaste, which was one of only two such proposals accepted by Chicago Public Schools for the 2004-05 school year.

The school, which serves the McKinley Park neighborhood, is housed in a former Catholic school.

Student enrollment will swell to 150 this fall and the school, which this year will add 2nd grade, will add a grade each year and eventually will include kindergarten through 8th grade and serve 450 students. There is already a growing waiting list for new enrollees.

On a recent day, students at Namaste started their day as they typically do with stretches. They also have a one-hour physical education class and recess each day.

The tiny children also get

'You have to worry about their physical well-being first because without that, the brain is not working.'

— Parent Michelle Ramirez

moving in interesting ways during a class called "reading in motion" in which students spell words and make letters with their bodies.

"It is difficult to tell children to come to school and just sit, sit and sit all day," said Sarah Groth, a kindergarten teacher who worked at the American School in Mexico City before being recruited by Slade to teach at Namaste.



Jocelyn Castellano, 7, sits with dad John after the weekly parent-child-teacher breakfast.

"We try to create a healthy environment for the kids. We don't just tell them to behave. We let them release that pent-up energy in the morning. And we show them how to behave."

Eyeing benchmarks

CLOCC will be studying Namaste's progress for at the least the next five years.

Researchers will be monitoring key benchmarks such as the children's height, weight and blood pressure, as well as students' and parents' attitudes about nutrition and exercise to determine the long-term impact of the program.

A 2004 study found that overweight kindergartners have significantly lower math and reading test scores compared with children of normal weight.

"I think most school interventions have included an exercise component or gotten rid of the pop machine or added physical education. But all the efforts have been relatively modest,"

said Dr. Katherine Kauffer Christoffel, medical and research director of CLOCC and a professor of pediatrics and preventive medicine at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine.

"We have all suspected up until now that something much more profound is probably needed," Christoffel said.

So far only preliminary data has been gathered, but Slade said parents have reported that their children are eating healthier and, in some cases, losing weight.

Many parents have given the school high marks. Michelle Ramirez says her 5-year-old son Gabriel has actually curbed his urge for fast food.

"We actually drive by and he doesn't always ask to go in there," she said.

"You have to worry about their physical well-being first because without that, the brain is not working."

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