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Kindergartner Roberto Navarro, 6, stretches during morning exercise class at Namaste Charter School in Chicago.

Tribune photos by Tom Van Dyke

School charts healthy course

4-year-old Chicago charter school teaches nutrition, encourages exercise to help fight soaring childhood-obesity rates

By Carlos Sadovi
Tribune staff reporter

The soothing sounds of Native American flutes and voices filled the basement lunchroom of the Namaste Charter School recently, as about 160 pupils, kindergartners through 2nd grade, stretched and took deep breaths during morning yoga exercises.

Most of the pupils in the elementary school in Chicago's McKinley Park had finished their daily breakfasts of fresh fruit, yogurt, granola and whole wheat bagels, and were focused on the words of Abby Rose, their yoga teacher.

"Remember, slow is good," Rose said. "Do you feel every little bone and muscle moving? Doesn't that feel so nice on a Monday morning?"

While many schools across the nation—including Chi-

cago public schools—are doing away with recess in an attempt to squeeze in more academics and raise test scores, Namaste pupils start their school day with morning exercises.

The pupils also have daily physical-education classes and recess. Students have regular nutrition classes and learn to make healthy food choices, said the school's principal and founder Allison Slade.

The 4-year-old Namaste, with about 250 pupils in kindergartners through 4th grade and predominantly Latino, was designed to help address the problem of childhood obesity. The school's philosophy is to nourish and stimulate the pupils' minds and bodies, Slade said.

The need is great, according to a study released in August that analyzed data from

the National Survey of Children's Health. The study found that in Illinois, about 15.8 percent of children between the ages of 10 and 17 were considered obese, the 14th highest rate in the country.

"Having a high fiber breakfast fills them up and gets them ready and focused to learn," Slade said. "They really do learn about what they need to eat in order to be able to pay attention and make it until lunch time."

Before their yoga exercises began recently, pupils wearing T-shirts with their school's name, Namaste—an Indian greeting that means, "my inner light salutes your inner light"—carried colorful backpacks as they filled their plates.

Kindergartner Raven Ellis chose melon and a dollop of yogurt sprinkled with granola. Raven, 5, said she likes the way the food she eats makes her feel.

"When I have a good breakfast, it makes me feel good," she said.

Slade said both the students and their parents are taught about making healthy food choices. Parents are invited into the school every Friday to eat breakfast with their children and engage in yoga exercises.

Other parents, such as Delia Saldierna, take part in exercise programs offered by the school after classes begin. Holding a pair of small dumbbell weights in her hands, Saldierna joined in a 30-minute walk and adult yoga classes.

Saldierna, who has a kindergartner and a 3rd grader in the school, said her children have helped her learn to cook more nutritious foods and realize the importance of remaining physically active.

The school, which moved this year to a shuttered Catholic school at 3737 S. Paulina St., is sponsoring a grant program to give 20 teachers from across the country \$500 to help battle childhood obesity in their classrooms. Officials said more than 200 teachers from as far away as Hawaii have applied for the grants.



Namaste Charter School Principal Allison Slade helps kindergartner Suzette Sanchez, 6, with her breakfast.

But sometimes the lunches, which may include roasted salmon with yellow squash, wild rice pilaf and a salad bar, can take some getting used to for children such as 1st grader Jonathan Brito.

"I don't like the food. Sometimes they give us gross food ... when I take one bite I don't like it. I like nachos," he said. csadovi@tribune.com