

## Teaching Your Children Well

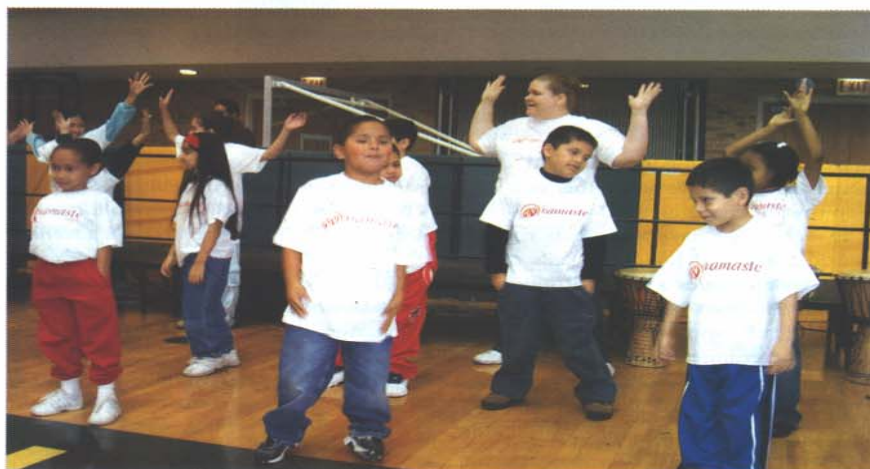
Chicago's Namaste charter school combines nutrition and fitness with academics for a healthy education *By Mike Stokes*

From its deep-dish pizza and Maxwell street hot dogs to any of the hundreds of places that can rightfully claim to have the best beef sandwiches on the planet, Chicago is as well known for its belly-busting cuisine as it is for its world-class museums and architecture. If one new public school has its way, however, Chicago may also be known for revolutionizing the way America's children exercise, learn and eat.

As an increasing number of cash-strapped schools make cuts to physical education and athletics programs, while vending machines offering soda and candy have become as commonplace as mystery meat in school cafeterias, it should come as no surprise that childhood obesity rates are on the rise. Nearly 25 percent of Chicago's children are considered obese by the time they enter kindergarten.

Since opening its doors in August 2004, the faculty and staff of Chicago's Namaste charter school in the south-west side's McKinley Park neighborhood have been working to buck these disturbing trends by nurturing its students' bodies as well as their minds. The school takes a holistic approach to education by integrating physical fitness and nutrition as core components of its rigorous academic curriculum. The result is a learning environment that is often difficult to attain, particularly in inner city schools.

The 90 kindergarten and first-grade students who attend Namaste school begin each day at 8:30 a.m. with a healthy breakfast and calisthenics before heading off to class to learn reading, writing and arithmetic. During the



course of the school day, the children also engage in 60 minutes of physical education, a component of education that is becoming increasingly scarce in many schools despite a great deal of research emphasizing the benefits of exercise and nutrition on learning.

### ACTIVE LEARNING

According to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, elementary students should participate in at least 150 minutes of physical education per week, yet a recent Harvard study indicates the average adolescent spends only 11 minutes per day engaged in strenuous exercise.

"All the research says that kids who are healthy and active perform better in school," says Allison Slade, principal and co-founder of Namaste. "Yet many school systems don't see the connection

**Namaste:** A greeting or gesture of friendship, kindness, appreciation and recognition that acknowledges the unique inner qualities of all members of our learning community.

**Charter Schools:** Independent public schools operated by outside organizations and monitored by the school district. They are subject to the same standards of safety, civil rights, special needs, and bilingual regulations. They go through a rigorous application process and are evaluated after 5 years.



between physical education and doing better in school. We hope this will be a step toward changing that."

It seems that having students running and jumping and bouncing balls during gym class provides a needed outlet that keeps them from bouncing off the walls during math, spelling or reading class. After exercising or eating a balanced meal, the students come back engaged and ready to learn without a midafternoon crash or excess energy that inhibits concentration.

"Having gym class every day makes a huge difference," says Namaste teacher Sarah Groth, who is now in her seventh year as an educator in Chicago public schools. "When you get exercise and eat better, you have more energy to get you through the day. I like that my kids come back from lunch or recess or gym in a better place to learn than if they were to sit in the cafeteria for 20 minutes filling themselves with sugar - and then trying to get them to sit still so I can teach."

"As a teacher, I really felt like cutting recess for time or safety issues had a detrimental effect on my kids' ability to focus and concentrate on getting their work done," adds Slade.

Each Friday, the children at Namaste focus on a different skill during gym class, ranging from hand-eye coordination exercises to mile-long walks to the park.

To gauge the results of Namaste's efforts, the school has formed a partner-

ship with the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children (CLOCC) to conduct a multi-year study that will measure Namaste students' overall health and fitness levels. Upon entering the school, students were surveyed to determine their levels of physical activity and the types of foods they eat. At the end of the school year, the students will take the same survey to determine if there's been a change. The data will continue to be collected over time as the students advance.

## HEALTHY APPETITES

Make no mistake, Namaste is not some New Age diet school where kids are pumped full of nuts and berries. Nor is it a boot camp for overweight kids. It is has the same rules and regulations of any Chicago public school, and its students and teachers come in all shapes and sizes. In fact, both cookies and chocolate milk occasionally find their ways onto the lunch menu.

"We don't take things away from the kids - they do eat cookies," says Slade. "They're just graham cookies instead of Oreos. And we offer chocolate milk on Fridays instead of every day of the week."

For lunch, students have the option of selecting the "Creation Station" salad bar or a more traditional main entrée. Those who opt for the salad bar must select at least one choice from four groups, which include lettuce, a vegetable, a starch and a protein - egg, ham or chicken. Students who select a different meal are also served a vegetable and fruit.

"We don't offer anything that has no nutritional value," adds Slade. "We don't serve them Cheetos, we don't serve them Pop Tarts - we try to limit sugar and have healthy snacks in the classrooms."

In fact, when CPS sends the school

products like Pop Tarts and turnovers that are served in other Chicago public Schools, Namaste's vigilant lunch staff sends them back.

"Our lunch staff helps us fight the fight," says Slade. "They have a much tougher job than they did at the other schools, because they have to make a salad bar every day, but they love the kids."

"The kids were a little fussy at first," admits Shelia Gordon, who's been serving lunches for Chicago public Schools for five years. "But as long as the food is fun to eat, like baby carrots and fruit cups, they like it. There are times when we've almost run out of salad."

Slade says that when it comes to nutrition, inner city kids simply haven't been exposed to the same variety of foods, particularly fruits and vegetables, as suburban kids. Therefore, they're often more reluctant to try new foods.

Namaste's emphasis on physical activity and maintaining a healthy nutritional balance does more than simply plant the seed that will likely lead to a healthy lifestyle - it also makes the children better students. A 1996 article in *Scientific American* noted "children who suffer from poor nutrition during the brain's most formative years score much lower on tests of vocabulary, reading comprehension, arithmetic, and general knowledge." Likewise, a 1998 article in *Pediatrics*, notes that students who ate school breakfast often had math grades that averaged almost a letter grade higher than students who ate school breakfast rarely."

It's precisely this sort of research that causes Slade to scratch her head whenever Namaste's core values are described as revolutionary.

"I don't think of it that way at all," she says. "I just think of it as common sense. And I think if we can prove what we're doing makes a difference, we can make a change in schools." ■