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THE **EDUCATION** ISSUE

**The Spring 2016 Guide to OC Private Schools
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SPECIAL SECTIONS: K-12 EDUCATION GUIDE, AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Family Wellness

By Lee Spieker

Making Exercise in School as Easy as Child's Play

Students work out on a Railyard Fitness Obstacle Course

Lack of exercise among America's youth contributes to a sedentary lifestyle that's robbing them of health and compromising their ability to succeed in school. A generation ago, kids commonly played outside until dark. Today, parents are challenged with trying to separate them from TV, the Internet, video games and smart phones.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), "Most children need at least an hour of physical activity every day." The NIH says that such regular exercise helps children keep a healthy weight, build and keep healthy bones, muscles and joints; feel less stressed; feel better about themselves; feel more ready to learn in school; and sleep better at night.

Other studies have shown that children who exercise one hour a day can improve their academic scores up to 40%, as well as experience less depression, or disciplinary issues in class or home. It may even reduce suicide, bullying, and help children make better food choices. [www.1houraday.org]

While regular exercise is no magic elixir, it creates a protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) in the muscles which then travels to the brain, when present in the brain it supports neural connections — like super nutrition for the brain. The BDNF gene provides instructions for making a protein found in the brain and spinal cord. This protein promotes the survival of nerve cells (neurons) by playing a role in the growth, maturation (differentiation), and maintenance of these cells.

To take advantage of these benefits, parents, PTAs, and educators are looking to put more exercise back in the curriculum and make it as easy as child's play. One new trend to motivate students to exercise in schools, from elementary through high school and beyond, is obstacle course training. Offering elevated, flat, curved, or inclined platform for exercises traditionally done on the ground like lunges, crab walks, bear crawls, push ups, pull ups, hop overs, etc. is catching on in popularity.

Students climb, crawl, jump, duck, bend, lunge, squat, twist, push, and pull themselves across the obstacle course, which naturally builds dynamic strength, balance, flexibility, and coordination through func-

tional movement. The total body workout is similar to how our ancestors naturally exercised in daily life for thousands of years. When students are up on the obstacle course, they're so excited to use it they don't realize they're getting a cardio or resistance workout.

Unlike traditional exercise done on a flat surface, the third dimension of height challenges students and develops their balance, vision, and focus in an unfamiliar environment. By moving through the obstacle course with their own body weight, students naturally improve their agility, skills for daily living, and when challenged, their PE teacher or other students can coach them past their comfort zone.

Having students model other successful students, often in pairs, is a good learning strategy. An obstacle course can also keep large numbers of students active without having them sit and watch while others exercise. It's easy to separate into workstation rotations, say for step ups, pull ups, over-unders, army crawling, or plyometric jumping and squatting.

While using an obstacle course at school will not by itself turn things around for America's sedentary youth, it is an easy way to start changing the way we think about exercise and can reacquaint them with their bodies and show them that, in fact, exercise is fun.

When students successfully, repeatedly exercise their bodies to gain new strength and agility, it motivates them. We hope they'll bring that active lifestyle home until it becomes a healthy life habit.

Lee Spieker is Founder and CEO of Railyard Fitness, Inc. (www.railyardfitness.com), an international leader in resistance and bodyweight exercise products including a portable, mobile obstacle course that can be shared amongst multiple schools in a district.

Mr. Spieker is a fitness expert and advocate for family fitness with roots in exercise product development and marketing. Mr. Spieker's former contributions to the exercise market include the original 13 "Buns of Steel" workout videos, Aerobafloor, the first exercise floor surface and the Stackable Aerobic Step.