**SPARK – Naperville, Illinois and The New PE Model**

**Naperville, Illinois**

**Naperville’s New P.E. fitness model sparks academic success**

Naperville provides a powerful case study on how aerobic activity can transform not only the body but also the mind. It is a wonderful template for reshaping our society.

The essence of physical education in Naperville 203 is teaching fitness instead of sports. What’s being taught is a lifestyle. The students are developing healthy habits, skills, and a sense of fun, along with knowledge of how their bodies work. They’re getting kids hooked on moving instead of sitting in front of the television.

The Naperville revolution started with equal parts idealism and self- preservation. A visionary junior high physical education teacher named Phil Lawler got the movement off the ground after he came across a newspaper article in 1990 reporting that the health of U.S. children was declining because they weren’t very active.

When Lawler and his staff took a close look at what was happening in gym, they saw a lot of inactivity. It’s the nature of team sports: waiting for a turn at bat, waiting for the center’s snap, waiting for the soccer ball to come your way. Most of the time, most of the players just stood around. So Lawler decided to shift the focus to cardiovascular fitness, and he instituted a radical new feature to the curriculum. Once a week in gym class, the kids would run the mile.

Despite groans from students, complaints from parents, and notes from doctors he was undeterred – although he quickly recognized that the grading scale discouraged the slowest runners. To offer nonathletes a shot at good marks, the department bought a couple of stationary bikes and allowed students to earn extra credit. This evolved into personal bests and what he dubbed the New PE: Students would be assessed on effort rather than skill. Soon heart rate monitors were incorporated, and Naperville’s gym students were graded on how much time they spent in their target heart rate zones during any given activity.

One of Lawler’s favorite statistics was that less than 3 percent of adults over the age of twenty- four stay in shape through playing team sports, and that this underscores the failings of traditional gym. He set up a program termed “small- sided sports” — three- on- three basketball or four-on-four soccer — where the students are constantly moving. Sports are still played – but within a fitness model.

Lawler took his message of fitness- not-sports to the outside world, talking to Newsweek and testifying before the U.S. Senate while Paul Zientarski, Naperville Central High School’s physical education coordinator and former football coach, enforced the New P.E. mission back home.

Even after Lawler retired from teaching in 2004 due to a diagnosis with colon cancer, he continued to work relentlessly to spread the message that fitness leads to academic success. Sadly, Phil Lawler lost his battle with cancer this year; his vision, however, lives on and grows stronger with each Naperville success and the acceptance of the New PE model.

There are fifty- two million children, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, who attend public and private schools in the United States. If all of them had the benefit t of Naperville- style physical education, our next generation of adults would be healthier, happier, and smarter. Dr. John Ratey, author of SPARK and founder of the Sparking Life movement.