

# Climbing to New Educational Heights

*Helping students aspire to new heights is taking a whole new meaning in many physical education classes throughout the country.*

By Tracy Carbasho

Indoor climbing is becoming a popular fitness activity that not only helps students build physical strength, but also facilitates the development of problem-solving and decision-making skills. Educators who have incorporated climbing into their curriculum say students of all ages enjoy the safe activity which teaches them to work as a team, trust others, take positive risks and have confidence in themselves.

Bill Wegehaupt is a 34-year physical education veteran who currently teaches at Lincoln Elementary School in Cudahy, Wisconsin. He decided to include climbing in his curriculum after attending a state physical education convention in 2002. During the state meeting, two teachers from the Sun Prairie Area School District in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, gave a presentation showing how their students benefited from climbing on a traverse wall that



was designed by Everlast Climbing Industries in Eagan, Minnesota.

A horizontal traverse climbing wall, measuring 40 feet long and eight feet high, was installed at Lincoln Elementary in 2003 and the results have been positive, according to Wegehaupt.

“Climbing offers so many different opportunities for the development of the student, most of which could never be taught via the conventional classroom-textbook method of learning,” he said. “Climbing wall

activities develop cooperation and do not stress competition. The physical education curriculum has moved away from the traditional team sport concept. Now, the emphasis is on lifetime activities.”

The Mesquite Independent School District in Mesquite, Texas, received a Carol M. White Physical Education Program grant in 2003 and used a portion of the money to install climbing walls in all of its 31 elementary schools. The grant proposal submitted by district officials included

information about improving the physical education program with the introduction of new and innovative lifetime activities for students.

“The great thing about climbing is that it’s a natural skill. Children begin climbing before they learn to walk. They pull themselves up on furniture and hold on to get their balance before they take their first steps, so it’s an easy thing to teach and they can have immediate success,” said Kathy Goodlett, health and physical education coordinator at Mesquite ISD. “We have found that because it is a challenge by choice and the kids set their own goals in many instances it builds their self-esteem.”



Goodlett said climbing gives students a chance to improve their level of fitness in a challenging and fun manner unlike some of the more traditional physical education activities, such as push-ups or pull-ups.

She also noted that core academic skills, such as math and high-level thinking, can be incorporated into the climbing by using games and other teaching methods.

The Mesquite ISD allows students to set their own objectives and predict how long it will take them to reach their goal of traversing all 12 horizontal panels of the wall without stopping.

Goodlett stressed that the climbing wall is safe for use by all ages, especially since the students climb horizontally instead of vertically. The walls provided by Everlast Climbing Industries feature non-skid safety mats that are anchored to the bottom of the structure to provide a soft landing when students step off the panels. The same mats can be folded up onto the wall during storage to prevent unsupervised usage.

“It is very safe,” said Goodlett. “Most playground equipment, like monkey bars and swings, that the public uses takes kids higher than eight feet and has gravel underneath.”

The Fort Worth Independent School District in Fort Worth, Texas, was equally impressed with the benefits of the traverse climbing walls. The district recently used part of a \$350,000 federal grant to install the units at 19 of its middle schools.



“We knew we weren’t getting enough students active in our physical education program so we created a multi-activity approach and thought the walls would help the students with their upper body strength and team building,” said Georgi Roberts, program director of health and physical education for the Fort Worth ISD. “At first, people thought we were talking about high walls, but they are traverse walls so there is no danger.”

Prairie View Middle School in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, plans to add a climbing wall to its repertoire of physical fitness equipment within the next few years, according to Paul Ackley, physical education teacher.

“Climbing helps build children up mentally, emotionally and physically,” he said. “Physical benefits come very fast with students, kids love to climb and with climbing comes muscle development. Goal setting, teamwork and cooperation, along with improving communication skills, are all benefits of having a climbing wall in your gymnasium.

“Learning how to take positive risks and succeeding is a big part of climbing and even if you fail, you will always have a chance to try again,” added Ackley. “The skills that climbing walls develop are age-appropriate at all grades and learning these skills at a young age can only help our students in the future.”

Ackley said parents are quick to buy into the excitement surrounding the climbing walls which

are rapidly becoming an integral part of the new physical education philosophy that emphasizes lifelong learning and fitness.