

A schoolwide 'Movement'



FEATURE STORIES

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Occupational therapists (from left) Dora Sarkodie, Kristen Farrell and Rachel Fishman, and physical therapist Markella Spiratos keep PS 396 moving.

The magic that gets the school day started in high gear at PS 396 in the Bronx is a schoolwide, early-morning call to action.

“Now let’s get moving!”

And in every pre-K to 5th-grade classroom, everyone moves to the music. Teachers join their students for three minutes of jumping jacks, running in place, stretches and extended arm rolls.

They call it Movement in the Morning, and 2nd-grade teacher Allyson Plasterer is a big fan. “It gets the wiggles out and makes a huge difference in alertness and focusing,” Plasterer said. “The children are awake and alert and in the mood for work.”



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In the therapy room, Fishman gives one student some individual attention.

“The bonus is that the kids love it, so they start the day in the right mood,” she said.

Aware of how important it is for children to be active and feel positive about their bodies, Dora Sarkodie, one of PS 396’s three occupational therapists, initiated the school-wide, start-of-the-day program in September. The idea, she said, was to couple fun movement with modern upbeat music to motivate students to move and prepare their minds for learning.

Morning movement takes only a few minutes but its value stretches through the day, says Principal Nicole Tine.

The Bronx school is an ASD Nest Program school — an inclusion program for higher-functioning children with autism spectrum disorders nested in a supportive neighborhood school to create an environment that helps them learn how to function well academically, behaviorally and socially in integrated classrooms and in their communities.

Classes are small and taught by two trained teachers working collaboratively with a large support staff of occupational, physical and speech therapists as well as music, art and gym teachers. Kindergarten combines four ASD children and eight typically developing children. The ratio changes as the children mature, reaching a 4-to-16 ratio in grades 4 and 5.

With Movement in the Morning, Sarkodie moved exercise from the therapy room for a limited few into the classroom so everyone would benefit.

“We don’t just focus on one child at a time, but on everyone all the time,” Sarkodie said.

Seeing the positive effect of the morning exercises, many teachers have incorporated movement activities during the day to keep the wiggles from creeping back in. Some teachers find movement activities particularly helpful after lunch and the hurly-burly of the cafeteria. Then it’s time for a few minutes of yoga music, lights turned low and some relaxed movement to get everyone in the mood for learning in the afternoon. On testing days, the staff adds relaxation movements.

The trio of occupational therapists said their work helps students, particularly those with autism spectrum disorders, to regulate themselves and develop fine motor skills.

Physical therapist Markella Spiratos, on the other hand, focuses on developing gross motor skills. Working with the gym teacher, Spiratos pushes in or pulls out students to work on dribbling, throwing and catching a ball “to bring a student up to par with others in the class.”

“The OT and PT crew are phenomenal,” raves 4th-grade teacher Bernice Patten.

“In graduate school, you learn that this is what school should be,” Plasterer said of PS 396.



Miller PhotographyIt's elbow to knee to start the day in Bernice Patten's 4th-grade class.



Miller PhotographyKindergarteners are running in place to get rid of the wiggles with inspiration from teachers Eve Dworkin (left), Nate Dallas (right) and Farrell.