

Having fun while getting a workout

By AMY NEFF ROTH
Healthy Living

Imagine playing a videogame during gym class.

That's exactly what the kids at Watson Williams Elementary School in Utica have been doing since the school installed three Sportwalls over Christmas vacation.

Students say that PE class is now better than ever. Four fourth graders, interviewed right after Steve Strife's class, gave the class a 10, for fun – and a 10 for difficulty.

That's because instead of using a joystick, this game is controlled by kids' bodies.

"I like (Sportwalls) way better than regular gym class," said fourth grader Rosie Cash. "I think that it's more athletic and it's more fun."

Students, divided into three teams, started class with a 2-minute relay race. They ran to a Sportwall, threw a medicine ball at one of its seven light-up targets and ran back to their line to hand off the ball.

The targets reward hits by lighting up and making a buzzing noise, creating the videogame-like atmosphere. Electronic scoreboards keep track of hits. A timer lets students know how much time is left in the race.

"I think it's great. I love it," said Strife, sounding as enthusiastic as his students who spent most of the class yelling and jumping to cheer on their teammates.

There are virtually limitless ways to use the wall, Strife said, that let him teach any skill or use it with any sport. And the walls work for kids who are good at a sport as well as beginners, he said.

When the walls first went up, one boy who had always refused to do sit ups suddenly got so excited that he did 12, Strife said. "From that day on, I was sold on it. If that wall could get a kid to do sit ups who wouldn't do them, then it's worth it," he said.

During this fourth-grade class, Strife said he was able to work on skills that would normally take several classes to cover. They included: overhead throwing, overhand throwing, rolling, cardiovascular fitness, abdominal strength, shoulder stabilization, hand-eye coordination, foot-eye coordination, lateral (sideways) direction changes and catching.



Photos by HEATHER AINSWORTH/Observer-Dispatch

Watson Williams Elementary School student Daisy Tepan runs from the newly installed electronic Sportwall at the Utica school.

Here are the other games – played for two minutes in three teams with the highest score winning – students played to practice these skills:

- Sit ups, pressing a ball against a target after each one.
- Hitting the target once with each hand while holding a push-up position.
- Running up and striking the lit target with a swimming-pool noodle.
- Running up, throwing a beanbag at a target, picking it up and running back.
- Running up, karate-kicking the target and running back.
- Weaving through a row of cones, knocking out one target with a noo-



Andrew Kohl does a sit-up with a ball.

dle, running back through the cones.

- The same game, but hitting three targets.



"(It's) fantastic because it's so much fun. You lose weight. It's a good experience."

– Tristan Rumble



"I like the part when you kick it and whack it."

– McKinley West



"I like to do the balls when you do the chest pass ... (Before) we didn't get to throw anything but a basketball ... I'm sweating."

– Patrick Breen



"I like them way better than regular gym class. I think that it's more athletic and it's more fun ... I like to kick and whack the walls."

– Rosie Cash