All Second-Graders Learn to Ride a Bike in Washington, D.C. Public Schools

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SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, Let's Move! Active Schools and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.

Issue: Learning how to ride a bike is a rite of passage many children take for granted — but not necessarily in low-income neighborhoods of cities such as the District of Columbia, where many parents may not know how to ride a bike or be able to afford to buy one for their kids. In the fall of 2015, a unique opportunity arose to offer bike-riding instruction as a curriculum subject for all D.C. public school second-graders. It was the brainchild of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) Director of Health and Physical Education Miriam Kenyon, who had learned that, despite growing up in a city that was undergoing a two-wheeled renaissance, large segments of students couldn’t ride at all.

Big Idea: SHAPE America member Kenyon’s cue came when DCPS announced a unique new initiative called Cornerstones, which assigns diverse curriculum projects to entire grades across the school system. These in-depth, engaging and project-based learning opportunities are designed to help students make critical real-world connections and narrow the “white vs. black, affluent vs. poor” achievement gap. Physical education — often overlooked for its integral lifetime value — was a perfect area to target, and bike-riding was a natural pick. All second-graders would have the opportunity to experience one of the world’s most beautiful, bike-accessible cities on two wheels.

Implementation: Kenyon chose second grade as the “sweet spot” — the age where some kids already knew how to ride and could be challenged to hone their skills, and others had never learned or were fearful of falling. With $250,000 provided by the District Department of Transportation, DCPS purchased a fleet of bikes.
of 950 sturdy, new Diamondback Viper and Mini Viper BMX bikes, plus helmets, and bike racks, which would rotate through the entire district in the course of the school year. Volunteers assembled the bikes; teachers took a day-long, professional-development seminar to learn how to teach bike riding; and the Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA) stepped in to teach bike safety.

Results: Over the course of several weeks, students learned about helmets and hand signals, how to assemble and repair a bike, how to pedal and balance, how to ride safely and observe the rules of the road, and how to negotiate obstacle courses and other challenges. After testing all possible routes for safety, steep hills, etc., teachers led students on a five-to seven-mile trek to a nearby park to celebrate their newfound skills, confidence, and proficiency. Some schools chose D.C.’s scenic Rock Creek Park, where police on horseback joined them for a picnic; others rode to the Capitol, where they had races with the Capitol police. When a unit finished in one school, the bikes and helmets were shipped off to another, until the entire district was covered.

Fast Facts:
- Budget: $250,000
- Schools: 79
- Students: 4,100
- PE teachers: 100
- Bikes: 950

SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:
- Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.
- Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.
- Demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns.
- Applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance.
- Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.

Tips From Teachers

“This was the best ride ever. At first, I was scared because I was not that good, but this has made me want to practice more and I had a great time on our ride.”

Lucien, second-grader, DCPS

“This ride was tough because we had so many hills, but I was happy when we got to ride downhill. That was so much fun!”

Adelaide, second-grader, DCPS

Additional Resources

Links to more information about this program can be found at shapeamerica.org/casestudies.