Issue: No matter the lesson or activity, every educator knows there will always be varying levels of interest — and their job is to motivate all students to actively learn and participate. In health and physical education classes this can be especially true, and is often amplified when teaching self-conscious preteen students.

Mike Ginicola, SHAPE America member and physical education teacher at the 425-student Nichols Elementary School in Stratford, CT, noticed this while teaching a jump rope unit to his fifth- and sixth-grade students. Fitness experts say that a jump rope is the single best all-around piece of exercise equipment you can own. Simple, portable and inexpensive, it can help you burn the calorie equivalent of an eight-minute mile. But according to Ginicola, jumping rope wasn’t all that attractive to his fifth and sixth graders. Some of the more image-conscious students didn’t want to work up a sweat, while others were downright intimidated by it, he says.

Ginicola wanted to teach his students the simple skills of jumping rope — and have them embrace the impactful activity — so they could continue it throughout their lives. After years of having after-school Jump Rope For Heart (JRFH) events (a national education and fundraising program jointly sponsored by SHAPE America and the American Heart Association), he decided to hold his events during a week of regular physical education classes. Ginicola found that tying his unit with the fundraising program created altruistic connections and personal learning experiences for the students.

The Big Idea: This past year, Ginicola got creative. “I combined two great ideas for my jump rope lessons,” he says. “I borrowed a ninja gamification system from a colleague, Ryan Armstrong. Students could earn martial arts ‘belts’ for levels of success, based on rubrics adapted for different grade levels.”

The idea of progressing from a white to a black belt turned out to be a game-changer for students of all ages. “It really engaged the students and framed jumping rope skills in a different narrative,” says Ginicola. “Next, I combined the ninja gamification system with some SOLO (Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes) taxonomy ideas by creating small mini-Pickers magnets that students could place on each ninja belt after completing the specified skill correctly.”

This not only kept students fully engaged the entire time, but allowed Ginicola to assess each student’s skills. “Gamification is powerful enough by itself, but when SOLO taxonomy is added, and students have to share different levels of understanding of...”
concepts by answering questions before certain level changes, it becomes an extremely impactful learning combination,” he says.

Implementation: After downloading the Plickers assessment cards, Ginicola attached them to inexpensive magnets, which he numerically assigned to each student. As students progressed through the required tasks, they placed their magnets on the corresponding “belts” displayed on a large, magnetic white board in the gym. Using an app on his iPad, Ginicola could quickly and easily collect the evidence of students’ progression.

Belt requirements included repetitions of up to 100 types of jumps, illustrated on a chart in the gym. The first several jumps were easy, but then progressed to trickier side-to-side and forward-and-backward moves. Students were not allowed to skip any belts, and achieving black-belt mastery required 100 consecutive jumps or several repetitions of complex jumps.

“Suddenly, the jumping rope unit was taken up a notch and it became a seriously challenging sport,” says Ginicola. It also helped get the students ready for the school’s Jump Rope For Heart event.

“The beauty of the Jump Rope For Heart and Hoops For Heart programs is the flexibility they offer for holding events,” notes Yasmeen Taji-Farouki, program manager of joint projects for SHAPE America. “Since the programs are aligned with SHAPE America’s National Standards for K-12 Physical Education, they complement an effective PE program.”

“Mike is a great example of how many PE teachers incorporate JRFH/HFH into their own curriculum,” she continues. “He tied in both events to his curriculum and then took things a step further by using technology to increase engagement.”

Takeaway: Ginicola’s hybrid system is successful because it gives students who are intimidated by the jump rope a series of small targets for success. “When you grant students autonomy and don’t tell them what to do, it greatly increases their engagement levels,” he says. “They take ownership of their learning and begin to work toward mastery.” He adds that the targets provide a built-in assessment tool that allows him to quickly and easily track students’ progress.

Though there are no actual belts for the students to wear, Ginicola believes that intrinsic, less tangible rewards prove to be more effective. “It becomes a more internalized process, and students feel great about what they have accomplished,” he says. “They also learn that failure is not final. Just as with playing video games, they may not be able to complete it yet, but they will if they keep practicing.”

Results: The K-6 students at Nichols Elementary School now can’t wait to become jump rope ninjas during the annual JRFH/HFH fundraising effort, and Ginicola’s ninja gamification/SOLO taxonomy system earned him a SHAPE America JRFH/HFH grant in 2016. The system also helped Nichols Elementary— a Title 1 school — become a Top 10 JRFH/HFH fundraising team in Connecticut three years in a row.

Program Impact

Because of innovative teachers like Mike Ginicola, the Jump Rope and Hoops For Heart programs have grown from a jump-a-thon held by a Milwaukee teacher in 1978 to 28,000 schools in every state in the country, and have raised more than $1 billion for cardiovascular research and educational programs in communities.

“The impact goes well beyond funds raised. Students learn the necessary tools, resources and practices to live a healthy life, including good nutrition, physical activity, staying tobacco-free, and maintaining a healthy blood pressure and weight,” says Yasmeen Taji-Farouki, program manager of joint projects for SHAPE America. “Students come home and share those life skills and heart-health knowledge with their parents and siblings, which can have life-changing effects on the family’s future.”

SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:

✓ Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.
✓ 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.

50 Million Strong by 2029

is SHAPE America’s commitment to put all children on the path to health and physical literacy through effective health and physical education programs. Across the country, HPE teachers and other supporters are making an impact by taking action in the following areas:

✓ Effective Instruction
✓ Healthy Behaviors & Physical Activity
✓ Advocacy

Want to know how you can make an impact? Learn more at shapeamerica.org/50million.