

SMART class looks a lot like recess



Photo by Jeff Thompson, Star Tribune

Jordan Elementary School first-grade teacher Cindy Lind, right, watched as her students, including Carly Brosious, center, played in the SMART room. The SMART program uses physical activities to stimulate brain growth. And all this running and jumping seems to work. "I've never had a better group of spellers," Lind said.

A program to stimulate brain growth is finishing its third year at Jordan Elementary. Other south-metro schools are joining.

By [Emily Johns](#), Star Tribune


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Stacy DeCorsey was on her hands and knees, crawling across a plastic mat on the floor.

The principal of Jordan Elementary crawled over words embedded in the mat. As her hands touched a word, she read it aloud. "Rug. Hut. Dug. Bug. Cut," she said.

DeCorsey was in her school's "SMART" room, an extra classroom that has been turned into a kind of child's paradise. Hula hoops hang in one corner of the room. A climbing gym stands in the middle. Bouncing balls, gym mats, trampolines and vibrant colors fill the rest of the room.

SMART stands for "Stimulating Maturity through Accelerated Readiness Training." It's a program made up of physical activities that stimulate brain growth in children. And it's catching on in other Scott County schools. Belle Plaine uses the program now, as does Jeffers Pond in Prior Lake. Two New Prague elementary principals are also looking at it.

All day, every day, this room is filled with classes of barefoot, out-of-breath kids with disheveled ponytails and disorganized clothes.

"We get to jump on trampolines and stuff," said Rachel Colby, a first-grader with missing front teeth. "I like the monkey bars." "I think we have found a fun and successful way to teach kids," said Cindy Lind, a first-grade teacher who presided over the organized chaos in the SMART room last week. "I've never had a better group of spellers."

Brain development

First-grader Ansley Miller crawls across a blue gym mat on her belly, trying to make it under a sort of limbo bar. Lind tells her to dodge markers on the mat, but stay close to the ground.

In Jordan, students in kindergarten and first grade spend 30 minutes a day in the SMART room.

The program was developed by the Minnesota Learning Resource Center, a state-funded center that researches innovative ways to get kids ready to learn.

SMART operates on the premise that today's children miss important developmental steps that could help their brains get ready to learn. Not getting to play outside or being in high-chairs instead of on their tummies hampers normal physical (and, thus, mental) development, according to Nancy Farnham, director of the center.

Activities focus on developing the brain stem, instead of the cortex, where most high-functioning academic learning takes place. The brain stem takes care of the more automatic, physical things that help learning, such as making sure a child's eyes can scan from left to right while reading.

For example, one activity involves a toy bear that slides on a string. The children hold the string horizontally, then lift up one side or the other and watch the bear slowly slide back and forth. That helps their eyes learn to track.

Teachers report that students can concentrate better and pay more attention to detail than they used to.

Talking it up

Jordan is now in its third year of the program, and DeCorsey has talked the program up to scores of other educators, as well as the Legislature.

During the first year, DeCorsey said, teachers could already see a difference. Only 52 percent of third-graders were reading at grade level at the beginning of the year. After four months of the program, that jumped to 90 percent.

The program isn't free for the school district. Farnham estimated the district had to spend about \$1,000 for all the supplies involved, and training each teacher cost more than \$400.

"My generation, we played outside a lot," Farnham said. "We were on merry-go-rounds and we did climbing and [monkey bars]," Farnham said. "Would SMART have helped us? Of course it would have helped. But today, kids get less physical activity, less outdoor time, less tummy time. It's probably more beneficial to this generation of kids."

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