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Carri Rogers, PE teacher at
Chancey Elementary





Carri Rogers with her students at Chancey Elementary.

**A PE teacher aims to inspire
in children a lifelong love
for health and fitness.**

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

**By Anne Marshall
Photos by Mickie Winters**

When the pack bursts into Chancey Elementary's sunlit gym, 27 sets of feet shift into miles-per-hour mode, sprinting around the basketball court, past folded-up navy bleachers like shrunken, khaki-clad Usain Bolts. In a cartoon rendering of this moment, numbers and punctuation would tumble out of brains, down backs, slip-slopping onto the shiny wood floor. Freedom! For the next 50 minutes! Freedom!

"Take a lap!" says Carri Rogers, a physical-education teacher in her 17th year, between high-fives and hellos. A five-foot-six-inch, attractive 44-year-old in black yoga pants, running shoes, short-sleeve shirt and green windbreaker, Rogers lights up as grinning faces whiz past her.

She radiates positivity. Students are "friends." When kids must sit for a lesson, rather than bark, "Sit down," she opts for "pretzels, pancakes, lollipops, lemons." Kids obey: Legs cross, rears flatten on the floor, hands fold over an imaginary lollipop, lips purse. Even her blond, curly hair hits her shoulders in a bubbly, happy puff.

Her first class of the day — an excitable clan of fourth-graders — finishes the lap with a gleeful surge toward a table holding white plastic pedometers trimmed in red, blue and green. Fingers hurriedly clip them on belt loops. Kids love pedometers; they're like exercise gateway drugs. Once on, most kids never stop moving, jogging in place just to get their total step count up. "Today your goal is to go over how many (steps)?" asks Rogers.

"Two-thousand," a high-pitched chorus responds.

Rogers typically breaks up her PE classes into three parts: activity, lesson and a closing game. Last week she taught how to use pedometers. She had kids jot down their total steps during one class period. Over the weekend she crunched numbers for an average, coming up with 2,000 as a goal.

"Make sure that pedometer is nice and snug!" she says before pressing play on a boombox. Adele's "Rolling in the Deep" begins. Legs take off, running around the basketball court counterclockwise. For the next few minutes, little bodies create loud, steady thumps. Joyful shrieks escape. Rogers will teach these fourth-graders for the next five weeks. That's how a lot of schools build PE into the curriculum — one chunk for a short amount of time. The era of PE embedded into the school day for the entire year has faded.

Aaron Beighle, a professor at the University of Kentucky's Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion, says high-stakes accountability testing ushered in by No Child Left Behind has contributed to the erosion of activity in schools. In addition to PE, recess has also diminished. This despite the fact that the Centers for Disease Control finds a positive link between movement and learning. "To me, it makes

no sense," Beighle says. "If you were to take all the psychological, all the mental, all the physiological, all the cognitive data and say, 'OK, based on this I want to create an environment where kids can learn,' you would never have kids sit like we have kids sit. It would be the last thing on your list."

Some believe this dip in physical education has played at least a small part in America's rising obesity rates over the last 20 years. In 2010, 36 states had obesity rates higher than 25 percent, including Kentucky. Last year, 36 percent of Kentucky children and teens were considered overweight or obese, down slightly from 37 percent in 2007.

"Freeze!" Rogers instructs, bending down into sort of a football crouch, hands on knees. All the kids halt their run and mimic her stance. "Stand tall," she orders. Students straighten, step their feet together and gaze at Rogers. She decides to incorporate a new activity into the jogging. When the music stops, kids must stop their run, tap toes and issue a friendly, "Have a great day" greeting to a fellow student.

She presses play. Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" ignites the gym. Kids tear into a run, singing along. When the music stops, sneakered feet touch and goofy "good days" are exchanged. Over the next few minutes, Rogers will review the difference between anaerobic and aerobic exercise, leading the class through line jumps and push-ups. Cheeks redden. A boy declares: "You can hear my heart in my head!" Rogers loves this. She wants them to return to class feeling worked out, refreshed, minds clear. At one point, as kids jog in between the anaerobic spurts, she can't resist peeling off her windbreaker. "This is important," she says as she runs. "Doing it with them."

Rogers gravitated toward a career in physical education after seven years working in the hotel industry. She returned to the University of Louisville seeking a new, more fulfilling career. An advisor recommended teaching. That clicked, given that Rogers had taught sports camps in her teenage years. The northern Ohio native had always been athletic. Sports helped accessorize an otherwise slow, small-town upbringing. Every season brought something new: fast-pitch softball, volleyball, basketball.

On this Monday morning as she jogs with the kids, the avid runner steps tenderly on her left leg due to a recently healed torn calf muscle. A one-inch scar on her right knee marks surgery for a ligament that tore nearly 30 years ago. An injury here, an injury there — such is the life of the amateur athlete, a role that may have seemed unlikely given her early role models. Born and raised by a single mother and grandparents, Rogers says she was surrounded by persistent bad health and obesity. Her mother and all six of her mother's siblings had Type 2 diabetes,



common for those carrying extra weight. Her grandmother also had Type 2 diabetes and died at 58 in part due to weight-related ailments. “We were, and in some cases still are, the poster family for the modern-day epidemic facing our nation as a whole,” Rogers says. In pondering her choice of marathons as a pastime, she decides, “To psychoanalyze myself, I would say literally I was (and) am trying to run away from my family’s health issues.”

She does have fond childhood memories of PE. But she realizes that she came to physical education with an advantage. “Athletes are going to be successful in this environment no matter what we do,” she says, sitting in her office lined by metal shelves stocked with exercise and health books. “If we want to establish love for lifelong activity . . . then we have to teach to all students and make all students successful.” She has children who’d rather sit in a corner and read, as well as those who shy away from running in front of peers due to bulk burdening their stride.

On the first day she can survey her kids and tell who might dread her class. Chancey’s student body, though, doesn’t struggle as much physically as other schools she’s been in. Chancey sits off Westport Road beyond I-265 surrounded by Louisville’s eastern, more affluent suburbs. Rogers started her career at a Jefferson County elementary school near the city’s core, where 90 percent of the kids qualified for free and reduced lunch. Lower-income families tend to face more health problems, including obesity. It was at this first school that Rogers felt inspired to transform her approach to PE. The mile run, the focus on team sports just seemed unfair. “Kids’ deficiencies, in the physical realm, really stand out in PE,” she says. “They don’t stand out sitting in the classroom. It can make them very self-conscious.”

After a 20-minute lunch (her only break between back-to-back classes from 10 to 3:45), a fifth-grade class scurries into the gym and begins warmup laps. “Good pace!” Rogers cheers. When a girl who’s both taller and a little heavier than her classmates slows to a walk, Rogers jogs up behind her, loops her arm and together they trot. The girl wears a reluctant smile, Rogers a proud one. “Heavy breathing! I like what I’m hearing,” Rogers shouts a few minutes later. By the end of the five weeks with her third-, fourth- and fifth-graders, she wants them to complete a roughly two- to three-mile jog/walk. This may sound no more enticing than the traditional model of PE, the one that has kids picking teams for kickball day in and day out. But the combination of pedometers, pop music and Rogers’ encouragement fuels excitement. Even a fashionable girl who didn’t want to “sweat out” her hair and a boy who clutched his chest and joked, “I’m dying!” never stopped. And that’s all Rogers wants. From sprinters to walkers, as long as energy is spent, she’s thrilled.

She points out a bespectacled, barrel-chested student wearing a red polo and gold chain. Pigeon-toed, he swings his upper body from side to side with each step. It’s not a pretty gate, but he’s got endurance. On the first day of class, when every kid got to choose his or her exercise, he opted for 16 minutes of running. Everyday, Rogers watches kids naturally embrace play and movement. She says it’s all about creating a space where a range of talents can explore and achieve. Every day she repeats with her kids the same mantra: Keep play safe, fair and fun. “I think kids naturally love to play,” she says. “I think it’s an intrinsic want or need until they’re conditioned for whatever reason not to enjoy it.”

Aaron Beigle often asks his University of Kentucky students their memories of PE. Most conjure negative tales. Few recall liking it. The most dreaded flashback? The mile run. Fitness testing in PE dates back to the 1950s. A series of scientific reports showed a nation of unfit youth. (Sound familiar?) Concern grew that the military would not be able to find suitable recruits. President Dwight D. Eisenhower started

the President's Council on Youth Fitness. In 1957, fitness testing began for five- to 12-year-olds as a way to gauge health.

Beighle despises fitness testing. He says research shows that as kids grow, their fitness improves. So relying on testing as proof of better health is faulty science, he argues. Furthermore, it alienates non-athletes. "All you're doing is making failures out of kids and making failures out of (PE) teachers by focusing on fitness," he says. "Because that's an outcome we have very little control over." Genetics, after all, plays an insurmountable role in a child's fitness.

So Beighle's created a curriculum adopted by districts nationwide, including JCPS. It veers away from strength and fitness testing and goes light on such traditional PE games as kickball and dodgeball. Instead, he focuses on activities kids might carry into adulthood: walking, running, gardening.

Chancey Elementary's principal hired Rogers — a big believer in Beighle's model — to bring a different style of PE. As she jogs with the kids, she pulls her hair back into a ponytail. One loose curl bobs over her ear. "How many of you think we can jog eight to 10 minutes straight on Friday?" she asks her kids. The response: "Woooo!" At the end of class after team-building activities like moving gymnastics mats with no hands, the kids unhook their pedometers. One boy madly stomps in place for a few seconds, boosting his total. "2080!" he exclaims.

Rogers' equipment closet stands vibrant and orderly: rainbow-hued hula-hoops, soccer balls, pastel yoga balls, basketballs. While she doesn't consider herself a passive, "roll-the-ball-out" PE teacher, elements of traditional PE do exist in Rogers' classes. She wants her kids to have basic skills like throwing, catching, shooting hoops. "My goal at the elementary level is to get my kids, by the time they're in the fifth grade, comfortable," she says. "And if by the time they're in middle school they want to join some kind of team . . . they have the confidence and experience to say, 'I'm going to try out. I'm going for it.'"

Today, Rogers hopes to teach a group of second-graders the fundamentals of catching. Her tools? Fuzzy, spongy balls and plastic C-shaped shovel-type devices with handles called "scoops." Kids toss the soft orbs in the air. "Watch it go right into your equipment!" she says. "Keep your eye on it."

A little girl with exclamation points for pigtails and shaggy bangs looks up at Rogers.

"Is it OK if we miss?"

"What do you think?"

"Yes!" the class responds.

"Because why?"

"Because we're trying!"

Rogers will keep practicing with this crew in the next few classes. But she only sees her kindergartners, first-graders and second-graders once a week. Physical-education requirements vary from state to state. Kentucky's are low. There's no mandated PE in elementary or middle school. In high school, students must complete only one semester or trimester.

"Sadly, for some kids, it's possible that's all they got in 12 years of school," says Donna Benton, JCPS' practical-living specialist, who oversees physical education. Eighty-six of JCPS' 89 elementary schools have some kind of PE program. Most middle schools do too. But it's treated as a rotating elective, something kids may or may not attend for five or six weeks, depending on other interests such as band or visual arts.

The quality of PE also varies from school to school. Benton applauds Rogers. But she knows a lot of physical-education teachers aren't as effective. The district provides curriculum, complete with standards and guidelines. Not all follow them. And because PE isn't deemed as necessary as math or reading, there's little accountability. Only 35 states

require a physical-education certificate for their PE instructors; Kentucky doesn't. It's not uncommon to have a classroom teacher or coach pull double duty as the PE teacher.

Most health organizations, including the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, recommend an hour of physical activity per day, not necessarily all in one chunk. Kentucky does not require a set amount of physical activity in schools. Recess and PE can be withheld if it's deemed a student needs extra academic help.

About seven years ago state legislators passed a bill many PE instructors cite as an improvement. Thirty minutes of physical activity per day can now count as "instructional time." That wording is important because the state requires a certain number of instructional minutes per day based on grade level. By letting recess count toward that, it might encourage breaks from the desk. Still, Rogers has seen what happens as the school year barrels toward its stressful, critical end. "My other school, come testing time, those upper grades, they never went outside," she says. "They never stopped their day to go out outside and do recess."

"Ms. Rogers! Look! Look! I got 10 in a row!" shouts a student who stands about hip-high. His scoop in hand, he tosses and catches, tosses and catches. All around him kids throw their yellow and green balls, chasing and sliding for the catch.

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Rogers fiercely defends her class time. She hasn't had so much of a problem at Chancey, but at her previous school, teachers would sometimes assign work for completion during her class. "PE teachers have a big hole to get ourselves out of," she says. "PE's thought of as playtime. No intentional teaching going on. No intentional learning going on. This is an area of the curriculum that should be valued." A sharp mind benefits from a tuned body. Rogers wants to empower kids. They can control their health, no matter their home life. She knows. In the coming days she'll have lessons on the immune system, the dangers of tobacco and target heart rates.

For now, a little before three in the afternoon, the last class of the day arrives. First-graders march into the gym and flop to the floor. Imitating a seal, they crawl forward using their hands only; legs stay limp, dragging behind them like hind-flippers. When they reach one corner of the basketball court they pop up and imitate an elephant walking. For her littlest students, Rogers has them imitate different animals as a warmup. (The clumsiness of it all is as enjoyable for adults watching as it is for kids participating.)

For the first time today, a boy with dark eyes and closely shaved hair stands motionless, weepy and uninterested. Another teacher informs Rogers that he's had "issues" with his teacher today. "This is PE now," Rogers whispers into his ear. "We laugh and have fun, right?" He nods, his eyes still threatening tears. "Go take your coat off when you're ready," Rogers says.

Over the next 50 minutes, he crab-walks. He tosses fluffy balls into a scoop. Sadness lifts. As the class lines up to leave, Rogers bends down, puts her arm around the boy. "You feel better?" she asks. He unleashes a big grin.

"Good. Love ya. See ya," she says as he skips out the door.

