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Alumni Asche and Winkelman engage young minds through Brain Gym

Summary: The 26 activities support the development of key sensory motor abilities that help students get ready to learn.

(April 25, 2011)-It is always a challenge to make learning fun and engaging, but two University of Minnesota, Morris graduates are making great strides and helping students be successful. Mary Stark Asche '95, originally from Kensington, health and physical education (PE) teacher, and Darcy Rheingans Winkelman '82, originally from Appleton, elementary PE teacher, are making learning easier and enjoyable for Morris Area Public School students with a project called Brain Gym.

“Brain Gym is 26 activities that support the development of key sensory motor abilities that help students get ready to learn” says Asche. “We wanted our PE students to learn Brain Gym in PE and then implement the activities in their regular classrooms. Darcy Winkelman went to a Brain Gym workshop in Fergus Falls and saw its benefits and potential to help in PE and the classroom. She and I discussed how we would have my tenth, eighth, and seventh graders help teach her elementary students the Brain Gym activities.”

One example of a Brain Gym movement is the Cross Crawl. It involves touching the right hand to the left knee, then the left hand to the right knee, for about a minute. While a seemingly simple series of gestures, the movement actually brings many levels into play.

“The Cross Crawl crosses the visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile midline, uses both eyes together and uses spatial awareness,” says Asche. The results are improvements in spelling and writing, attention and listening, reading and comprehension, improved right/left coordination, ease of movement, and enhanced breathing and stamina.

Winkelman works with the elementary students and staff teaching them the Brain Gym movements. Both Winkelman and Asche have helped students prepare for testing in physical education and in the regular classroom using Brain Gym techniques.

Asche's 10th grade students created a DVD of the 26 Brain Gym activities that will be given to all elementary classroom teachers to help them implement the project.

“The DVD is being mass produced right now, and then it will be distributed to the elementary teachers,” says Asche. “In the high school, two teachers, plus myself, have used it in the classroom and have noticed improvement in attention and writing.”

Others who have helped with the project have been Cheryl Kuhn, who wrote the Statewide Health Improvement Program grant to fund the project, and Mike Cihak and Roger Boleman with the University of Minnesota, Morris Instructional Media and Technology, who helped create the DVD.

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