

## Stability Balls Versus Chairs

By Barbara Piccirillo

Being an occupational therapist and interested in how movement can improve memory, attention and learning, I read several articles about the use of stability balls as a replacement for chairs in a classroom. I decided to see if I could get funding to try it here in M.S.A.D. No75. The Trust for Our Future awarded a mini-grant for purchasing stability balls for a classroom at Woodside Elementary School this fall. Marybeth Browne, a fifth grade teacher, volunteered her classroom for this trial. We began the trial in January. Prior to ordering the balls, each student's height was measured to determine the appropriate size ball. Data was collected prior to replacing the chairs with the stability balls to see what the impact would be on attention to the tasks (See table below.). In seat behavior, upright posture and standing versus sitting at the desk were all documented over three different observations. Now that the students have settled in to using the stability balls, the same data was recently collected. All behaviors decreased.

Results: (Average incidents of three observations)

	Pre-Stability Balls	Post Stability Balls
Up out of seat and away from desk	17	7
Head down on arm, desk or resting on palm while elbow on desk	12	3
Standing longer than 10 seconds vs. sitting at desk	5	<1

The class was instructed on the appropriate use prior to getting the stability balls. Mrs. Browne was a little skeptical at first about whether students would use the ball appropriately. However, she reports that it is going well; and if a student does not use the ball correctly, it is taken away for the day. She reports that the following day, that student follows the rules. She also reports that when students from other classes come in to her room, they are able to use the stability balls successfully. Mrs. Browne states, "The kids really like the balls. It's a unique element in our class".

The class has also been instructed in some "exercises" to use as a group when it is determined motor breaks are necessary to improve focus and/or when indoor recess is occurring due to poor weather. As the core curriculum requirements increase in the district and recess time is decreased, the stability balls provide an opportunity for extra movement built right into the teaching/learning going on in the classroom. Research has determined that after 17-20 minutes we all need to move in order to attend to and recall what we are learning. The stability balls also allow those students who benefit from extra movement to focus, attend and learn, the opportunity to do so. I asked the class, "How many of you like using the stability balls over the chairs?" All but one student has chosen to use the ball and each of the students reports preferring the ball to the chair. Comments from the students include, "It helps me focus when I can bounce. I get unfocused when I can't move", "It helps my penmanship, drawing and posture", "It is more comfortable than sitting in a chair. If I need to move, I can bounce."

Mr. Dedek, Woodside School principal states, "I'm really proud of this pilot program. I've seen a great deal of benefit for students. They are using core strength and balance all the time, incrementally building strength and stamina and that carries over into their work and attitude about work. I'm interested in growing the pilot into a younger grade classroom next year. Barbara and I are planning to approach parents to help support this work into a willing third grade class for next Fall. While, I think it's too early to say that stability balls will replace traditional chairs in the classroom, I am confident we have a new tool in the tool box to help individualize our learning environment." "In a time where budgets are tight, having a tool in the classroom that has multiple-use potential is critical. No longer do we have to think so narrowly about furniture use, rather we can see a classroom where physical activity, posture, core strength, attention, focus, and stamina are all supported by the seat a student uses. We think there is great potential for student learning and creative instruction".

It is my hope to continue to introduce stability balls into more classrooms at Woodside School as funding through grants and fundraising activities allow.



Mrs. Browne and her class