Play program studies, promotes activity for girls
By ADRIANA M. CHAVEZ

While most children in the U.S. between the ages of 6 and 15 don’t meet the physical activity guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, girls are at particular risk. Two researchers at New Mexico State University, however, are trying to change that with their study involving elementary school girls and NMSU athletes.

The program, Aggie Play, was developed by principal investigator Phillip Post, an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology and Dance at NMSU’s College of Education, and co-principal investigator Rebecca Palacios, an associate professor in the Department of Public Health Services at NMSU’s College of Health and Social Services. The program’s initial focus is on girls, who are consistently less active when compared to boys regardless of their race, income status, weight or age.

Post and Palacios received funding from the Paso del Norte Healthy Eating and Active Living initiative and the Mountain West Consortium Clinical and Translation Research initiative to support the program. Aggie Play is modeled after the Bay Area Women’s Sports Initiative, a nonprofit program in northern California that uses female college student athletes from local universities to engage elementary school girls in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity for an hour once a week after school.

Post and Palacios collaborated with Enrich the Kids after-school program to deliver Aggie Play at Hillrise Elementary School. Enrich the Kids director Angie Montes worked with Post and Palacios to integrate Aggie Play into the Enrich the Kids after school programming. Both Post and Palacios said Aggie Play would not have been possible without Montes’ support.

Post said the goal of Aggie Play is to encourage 65 girls at Hillrise Elementary School to become more active while interacting with NMSU female athletes and kinesiology students. The program began in August and is expected to take place through May. Female athletes and students visit Hillrise Elementary for Aggie Play for an hour twice a week, while researchers keep track of each girls’ fitness levels and body composition. Girls participate in several activities including dance, soccer and active games that involve lots of running. Breaks and snacks are provided.

Meanwhile, researchers with Aggie Play are also studying students at Alameda Elementary School who are not participating in the program. Those students will serve as the program’s control group.

“This is a one-year project but we anticipate seeking additional funds to continue the program next year,” Post said. “Our athletic director (Mario Moccia) has been very supportive of the program and has encouraged our female athletic teams to participate. Our athletes have to complete 15 hours of community service each year, so this is a nice opportunity for our female student athletes to make a positive impact on their local community.”

So far, the NMSU women’s tennis, cross-country, soccer and equestrian teams have volunteered to participate in Aggie Play. Volunteers from NMSU’s dance program have also spent significant time volunteering in the after-school program. Palacios said she hopes the program will not only continue next year, but expand to other Las Cruces schools and include boys.

“We’re trying to highlight the importance of being active,” Palacios said. “The female athletes and (NMSU) students are meant to be role models and serve as reinforcement for these girls to remain active in life, and aspire to something bigger.”
Post and Palacios said they expect the participating Hillrise students will see significant changes to their Body Mass Index and overall body composition. The girls may also have more positive perceptions of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and higher self efficacy to engage in physical activity, compared to students at the control school, Alameda. If the program is effective, there’s potential that other girls in southern New Mexico will see the same results if they participate in a program like Aggie Play.

For now, girls like Maribel Gutierrez, a 4th-grader at Hillrise Elementary, are having fun and learning from their NMSU mentors.

“I love Aggie Play,” Maribel said after taking a break from dancing on the school’s basketball courts. “You get to be active and it really moves your muscles.”

Students at Hillrise Elementary School in Las Cruces learn dance moves as part of the Aggie Play program, a research project by associate professors Phillip Post and Rebecca Palacios. Aggie Play is funded by the Paso del Norte Health Foundation to encourage physical activity among children between the ages of 6 and 15.

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