



News Release

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Pedaling through paragraphs: Sembach fifth-graders begin Read and Ride Program

By Shane Sharp

Europe Regional Medical Command Public Affairs

SEMBACH KASERNE, Germany – Fifth graders at Sembach Middle School are combining exercise and academics in a recently-implemented “Read and Ride” pilot program designed to boost physical activity and reading time.

With the Read and Ride program, students spend three, 20-minute sessions per week, reading while they pedal on small, stationary cycles. These sessions may seem short, but the program doubles the amount of structured physical activity the students get per week and increases silent, sustained reading time by about 40 percent on a weekly basis, according to Dr. Cynthia Jackson, Instructional Systems Specialist for P.E./Health Education at the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) Europe.

Initial feedback from the reading riders is positive.

“It’s pretty fun,” said fifth-grade student Curtis Gardner. “I have a BMX bike at home and in the summer, I like to ride it down a big hill. I like to read sports books too. This is like combining them together so it makes it real fun.”

The program is a partnership between the DoDEA Europe, the Army’s Europe Regional Medical Command, the Rheinland Pfalz Sergeant Morales Club and the local chapter of the Association of the United States Army.

Army Maj. Jessica Counts, ERMC System for Health program manager, introduced the Read and Ride program, which is being used in some U.S. schools, to Jackson as a way to increase the amount of physical activity students receive on a weekly basis. As part of the Performance TRIAD, the Army Surgeon General recommends 150 minutes of activity per week. Counts found a willing collaborator in Jackson for the pilot program, who was also seeking ways to promote physical activity for students.

“Physical activity is part of the Army Surgeon General’s Performance TRIAD which also promotes improvements in sleep and nutrition habits in addition to adequate exercise,” said Brig. Gen. Van Coots, Commander of Europe Regional Medical Command. “This program is an excellent example of what the Performance TRIAD is all about – small improvements in critical areas can make a big difference.”

“Increasing reading competency is a top goal of the Sembach Middle School so we thought the program would be a good fit,” said Jackson. “We contacted the P.E. teacher, Mr. Street, who helped spearhead the initiative and recruit teachers. The Sembach Middle School fifth-grade teachers Ms. DeGavage and Ms. Steigerwalt enthusiastically agreed to become part of the pilot.”

Identifying classes to participate in the program was only half of the start-up work. The program still needed enough pedals for all the fifth-grade feet at the middle school.

According to Jackson, NCOs with the 21st Theater Sustainment Command arranged for the Rheinland Pfalz Sergeant Morales Club to fund half of the equipment costs. The other half of the costs were graciously provided by the local chapter and regional organization of the AUSA, she said.

After arrangements were made to purchase the necessary low-profile cycle units, the program began in January and has been met with enthusiasm from both teachers and students.

“We are glad our school was chosen for the pilot,” said Rosemary DeGavage, Sembach Middle School fifth-grade teacher. “When they asked if we were interested, we said ‘you bet!’ It’s wonderful to have an opportunity to start something like this and the students have loved being involved. If we are busy in the classroom and end up late for Read and Ride time, they are quick to let me know. It’s something they really look forward to.”

The Read and Ride program is designed so the students have ownership in their progress.

“This is a student program,” said Jackson. “They track their own data in areas like reading competency, fitness tests and body mass index. They established their baseline data in January and they will test again in April and then in June. Once the data is compiled, if the results are positive, we will offer [the Read and Ride Program] up to other schools,” said Jackson.

Early results are encouraging, especially in reading. “We’ve already seen improvement in their excitement for reading,” said Jackson.

The students seem to agree but they also brought up one critical area that can make or break the experience on an individual level.

“Pedaling on the bikes makes it more interesting. I’m so into my book, I don’t even notice how much I’m pedaling,” said fifth-grader Isabella Taylor. “Of course, if you don’t have a book you like, it would be boring and it would feel like it was lasting forever.”

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Fifth-grade students from Sembach Middle School, Germany, pedal on stationary cycles while reading as part of a recently-implemented “Read and Ride” program designed to increase the amount of physical activity and reading time students get on a weekly basis. (U.S. Army photo by Shane Sharp)

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