Pre-SOL Test Warm Ups
at the Elementary Level

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Stress is prevalent in our schools, from administration, with students, from parents and in many aspects of a teacher’s responsibilities. Including the constant pressure referred to as the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL’s). As brain based learning proponents, we see the amount of time school staff spends trying to get students mentally and psychologically ready to take this annual test. As Physical Educators we saw a void in the preparation; the physical preparation. Something was missing in the brain/body connection.

Emotions play a tremendous role in everyone’s daily lives. So too does attitude, and positive thinking. Mark Pankau devised a way to help alleviate some of the pressure felt from all circles, especially that of the students. It is called the Pre-SOL Warm Up, which takes 25 minutes to complete. It can be done in less time if need be.

Guilford Elementary School

There are four classes per grade level in Grades 3, 3 and 5. The entire grade level is brought to the gym approximately 35-40 minutes before the start of their SOL test that day. Usually this means the students arrive at 8 AM. Each class is assigned one of four station activities. Four corner cones outline a circle walking lap around the gym floor. Two classes are assigned to start at opposite corner cones (North and South).

The other two classes are assigned each to one side of the gym floor, inside the corner cone locations. These two classes will either perform partner or individual movement activities. Some examples are (1) partner call throw and catch while walking around their half gym space, (2) individual rope jumping, (3) individual scarf juggling, (4) scooter activities, (5) cup stacking. Each new test day sees different activities for the inside cone activities for variety.

On the Instructor’s signal high beat per minute music (bpm) begins playing. The two classes assigned to the corner cone areas begin power walking in a clockwise direction. Nothing faster than power walking is permitted due to the number of students moving in the same direction at the same time.

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At the same time the inside corner classes begin their assigned activity. This first activity continues for approximately 5 minutes, although it can be a shorter time period. At the end of the time period the Instructor pauses the music and tells the classes to rotate to their next station. Outside corner classes move to an inside station, and inside station classes move to an outside corner station. The rotation can be predetermined and announced, or the Instructor can call out the change of location at this time. The music begins again and the second round begins.

This set time rotation continues until all classes have completed all four stations. At that time the high bpm music stops and low bpm music begins. Students are instructed to return any equipment to a designated area. All students then find a space on the floor and sit down. The Instructor then leads the students through a series of three Brain Gym ® Exercises; Thinking Caps (for improved listening skills), Hook Ups (for improved right and left brain hemisphere stimulation), and Lazy 8’s (for eye muscle stretching in preparation for reading the test questions).

**MAKING BRAIN GYM WORK IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL**

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With all the brain-based research coming to light extolling the benefits of movement and academic performance (among others), it was the perfect opportunity to introduce Brain Gym (BG) to my administration. Selling this program to administrators, content teachers, and students is a process. Incorporating and maintaining it into your program needs to be addressed as well. Here’s how BG evolved in my school.

First, though, talk to your fellow department colleagues to get them on board. How? Not only does this program enhance the students’ performance, but also it underscores the viable contribution we make to our school’s environment. Did you know… you can help to spot those students with reading difficulty just by observing them as their doing cross-lateral movements? And, you can help determine a usable classroom seating chart by assessing eye- and ear-dominance!

Second, I’m fortunate to have a proactive administration. One of my VP’s is a former PE teacher and did many cross-lateral movements back in his day. In turn, he could pick out those students (with a high degree of accuracy) who would have problems reading. So, he was already on board and excited. Then, I presented to an administration meeting, which led to doing so at a faculty meeting. OK, I’ll admit, this was (and still is) a tough sell. But, after chipping away, you’ll have some allies that may help you win over others. After receiving the thumbs up from admin, the next step was to determine how we would teach this to the students. How are we going to fit this into our school day?
Third, since all students come through PE, teaching everyone wasn’t the issue. Moreover, how was this going to fit into our current class structure? The progression of our segments within a class lent itself to fit the “passive phase” exercises after our instant fitness, exercises, and running, which is the equivalent to the “active phase” used in the elementary school model. Immediately following the cool down after the running segment, students spread out across the gym floor in a cross-legged position. In middle school, it’s important that they don’t sit near each other. Also, make sure they close their eyes during the “Thinking Caps” and “Crossovers.” (The latter is the same as the “hook-ups” in elementary school. For obvious reasons, we chose to substitute the name “hook-ups” versus “crossovers.”) Last, students opened their eyes during “Lazy 8’s.” As you see by our class structure, all we needed to do was to add 2 minutes (approximately 30 seconds/exercise) for doing these “passive phase” exercises. That was the easy part.

Last, how do we incorporate this into testing time? In our school, every Friday is “HPL” – Harper Park Live. This is our news program broadcast over the TV into each classroom. Fortunately, I get 5 minutes at the end to do a watered-down version of BG. With 3 minutes of cross-lateral movements set to upbeat music, we get warmed up. I know it’s not the ideal length of time, but... Students are highly encouraged to get out of and stand beside their seat. All movements are done within the space next to their desk. Remember, we’re talking about middle school and we need to contain the chaos. After this, students sit back down in their seats, crossing their ankles and proceed with the “passive phase.”

Taped versions of BG are played during our “major” testing times. I’ve had some core teachers tell me they’ve used it before “regular” testing as well, which is the ultimate goal! I mentioned before, you really must get your core teachers to support you. There’s a dramatic difference in participation when they’re doing the program, too. Also, we teach about brain food, meaning the need to fuel the brain with water, oxygen, and natural sugar. In addition, I’ve decorated a bulletin board to help promote Brain Gym. This board is located down one of the hallways leading to the gym. It’s just one more way to reinforce the program.

We at Harper Park Middle School are in our 2nd year of BG. You can see how we had to modify our program from that used in elementary school, but it can work. It truly begins with your heart and determination to sell it to admin, teachers, and students. I’ve had such positive feedback from parents and the PTA. Many teachers and staff come up to me to say how invigorating the Friday morning program is and how energized they feel. Believe in the benefits of the BG program and it will be a success.