

## A proven partner

Jan. 7, 2010



**Students are able to use the YMCA's recreational facilities before, during and after school, helping them fit more physical activity into the day.**

*Photo by Megan Stokes*

**By Megan Stokes  
Sun Staff**

Most Florida elementary schools don't have a gymnasium. Children usually spend recess hours in an outdoor pavilion.

Ten years ago NorthLake Park Community School and the Central Florida YMCA changed that by combining the YMCA's gymnasium, fitness centers and swimming pool with the elementary school. It gave this generation of kids, who are more susceptible to sedentary lives and obesity than their forebears, better access to physical recreation as well as creating a hub for the community.

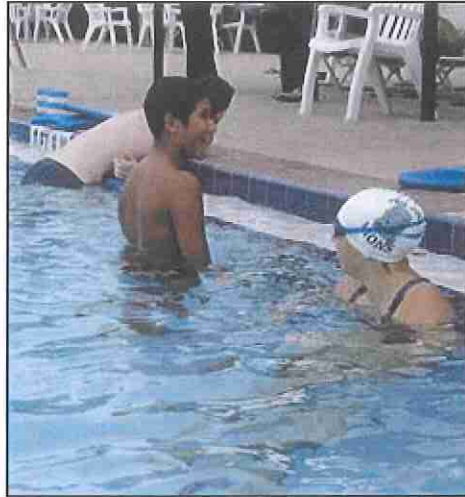
Now the YMCA wants to replicate this partnership in at least 10 more schools in Central Florida. All that's standing in their way is finding partners and funding. They already have some evidence that suggests the partnership works, including preliminary data from a University of Central Florida study headed by Public Administration Assistant Professor Thomas Bryer, which will be completed in late February.

Sierra Golden said she was never into physical activity or working out until she started school at NorthLake. She said the fitness routine she learned in elementary school kept her active even as her parents home-schooled her. Now the 18-year-old is a personal trainer.

"I took classes there, and my friends and I would hang out there," she said. "It got me into it and encouraged me."

Besides physical successes, such as Golden's, NorthLake has enjoyed academic success, such as being rated an "A" school every year of the 10 years it has existed. And while other schools are losing fine art programs and other extracurricular activities because of funding cuts, the YMCA is able to pick up the slack in NorthLake.

"The arts help you discover a talent you didn't know you had. Some kids excel in technology. Sports bring out athletes," said NorthLake Community School Principal Wendy Wagner. "Sometimes kids are not as strong academically. The Y stands for the whole child."



The UCF study's preliminary findings led Bryer to believe that the partnership allows the school to fight some issues that all schools face, like low test scores among students who receive free or reduced lunch. Approximately 40 percent of NorthLake students receive free or reduced lunch — a statistic that has remained consistent over the last 10 years — but this demographic still outperforms or performs at the same level as similar demographics district and statewide. The school also

ranks in the 90 percentile in reading.

Like other schools in the state, NorthLake students get 150 minutes of physical education a week but they have more fitness equipment available to them than other schools because of the YMCA, which can inspire more activity before, during and after school, said Florida Hospital's Center for Health Futures Director Dr. Richard Bogue.

"By the time a person is 12 they already have six to eight years of established eating and fitness habits," he said. "So if a person is overweight at 12 you can predict with 80 percent certainty that they will be overweight as adults.

"Because kids are there five days a week during the school year, you can create a new culture and environment of fitness."

Another possible advantage the partnership presents is the bonds it is suggested to have created within the community. Central Florida YMCA President Jim Ferber said they did a survey of the NorthLake neighborhood and found that each resident has been inside at least seven of their neighbors' homes compared to Central Florida's average of two.

"They get to know each other better because the Y is the community hub. It is the energy center for the entire community," he said.

Because it is a hub, YMCA Executive Director Nikki Rach said it promoted more parental involvement.

"On Friday nights, we have parents here playing soccer and the kids cheer, and then on Saturday mornings, the kids play soccer here and the parents cheer," she said.

But the idea of so many adults using the YMCA/school has made some parents uncomfortable.

"Security was an issue for me," said Andy Ragndale, whose children attended the school.

Ferber thought the single-point entry and security cameras at the school actually made it safer.

Bryer has yet to conclude whether the partnership's success should be attributed to the YMCA or if the school would have had the same success if they had partnered with another health-oriented entity such as Bally's Total Fitness or Boys and Girls Club. According to the study, the majority of NorthLake teachers and YMCA staff said the YMCA is the best partner because of their high quality facilities, their reputation and values and the quality of their staff.

"Preliminary information suggests that a good chunk of the positive outcomes here are unique to this partnership," Bryer said. "This is one question that is of great interest right now since they are looking to possibly replicate this partnership."

Ferber said there were discussions in the past about partnering a YMCA with Avalon Middle School. Eric Marks, Avalon Park Group vice president, said the model "clearly works" and they know from their current partnership with the YMCA as a tenant in the downtown area that there is demand in the community but a lack of land around the school will present a challenge.

Although space might be a challenge, Bryer said initial costs are lower when building a partnership like the one at NorthLake Park.

The two entities share administrative staff, office space and utility costs. Building construction cost \$12.6 million in 2000 and the 2004 Glatting Jackson assessment estimated that building them separate would have cost an additional \$7 million and 20 more acres of land. Bryer has yet to determine the operational savings.

Rach does not doubt this partnership can be duplicated in other schools but she said it takes a lot of work and commitment to pull it off.

"You have to have a mutual respect for each other and be on the same page," she said. "This situation is better but it's not easy. You need people who are dedicated to what's right, not what's easy."