**Issue**: Childhood obesity is a problem that weighs heavily on New Mexico — literally. More than 25 percent of the state’s kindergarten students are overweight or obese — higher than the 17 percent national average, according to the New Mexico Department of Health.

The issue is keenly felt by many of the 1,500 students at Volcano Vista High School, which serves one of the state’s largest public school districts — Albuquerque. Ranked the 48th poorest in the nation, the district was recently affected by statewide budget cuts that eliminated funding for physical education. The district also passed a waiver allowing freshmen to opt out of the one mandatory year of PE to join the marching band or ROTC. After freshman year, PE is offered strictly as an elective.

Physical education teacher and SHAPE America member Amy Suman began teaching at Volcano Vista four years ago after a decade in elementary school because she “wanted a challenge” — and she got her wish. She took on additional roles as strength & conditioning coach, yoga instructor, and staff wellness lead, tapping her strengths as a role model and motivator. She is also a warrior, battling unyielding policies that she believes exacerbate the obesity issue.

“I’ve been fighting for years to change the situation, but there is no PE mandate in New Mexico,” says Suman. “PE is one of the only subjects that is not in alignment with national standards.”

Suman also has been vocal about the lack of healthy eating choices at school. “Every day, fried chicken nuggets or patties and pizza are served for lunch, and the salad bar was removed because of possible ‘contamination’ of the vegetables [putting students at risk for an E. coli outbreak],” she says. “The kids go home hungry to working parents who don’t have time to grocery shop and cook, and so they go to fast food restaurants or eat prepared macaroni and cheese or mini-tacos. Their diets consist mainly of fat, sugar, salt and very limited vegetables.” Not surprisingly, many students struggle with type 2 diabetes, low self-esteem, and other physical and mental health issues.

**The Big Idea**: Fortunately for Volcano Vista’s students, the school’s team of highly qualified physical educators designed an elective PE program for grades 10-12 that is diverse, challenging and multicultural. Weight training, yoga, aerobics, body conditioning, and team/individual sports are complemented by lifetime sports such as skiing, rock climbing, camping, bicycling, and other activities. Freshmen get a teaser of what’s available in the spring of freshman year and can select an activity that appeals to them. With something for everybody, nearly 75 percent of the second-year students opt for elective PE.

“At Volcano Vista High School in Albuquerque, NM, PE is not required after freshman year. Since designing a new elective PE program for grades 10-12, nearly 75 percent of second-year students take the course.
Implementation: Despite the lack of budget and state mandate, Volcano Vista’s PE electives have generous time slots — 40 minutes on Mondays and a full 113 minutes on Tuesdays and Fridays. Workouts start with 20-minute warm-ups, which might include scavenger hunts or buddy runs. Yoga attracts a capacity crowd of 40 students, including many athletes who want to add stretching and flexibility to their regimes.

“Some students just like to develop muscles and change their body composition without high impact activity,” Suman notes. The aerobics unit culminates in a May 5K run, which, to many students, feels like a marathon. “It’s a metaphor for life — one step at a time, and consistency is key,” she says. In the weight-training unit, third-year students can design their own programs.

Takeaway: The school’s elective PE program focuses on diversity and individuality, helping many special education/gifted/intensive-support students, English-language learners, and mainstream students to identify and develop their interests and skills. “We are masters at differentiation,” says Suman. “Not all students are good at everything, but everyone can be great at something, and we’ll help them. I am confident these students will continue their fitness journey throughout life.”

Results: The PE staff is proud of a curriculum that’s in alignment with SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education and New Mexico’s state PE standards, as well as the Common Core State Standards. Several of the teachers have been honored for individual excellence by the Golden Apple Foundation of New Mexico, the Albuquerque Public Schools Board of Education, the New Mexico Activities Association, and SHAPE America Southwest District.

PE electives may be “packed to the gills” and challenging to teach, but Suman earns the students’ cooperation, respect and appreciation by staying firm and motivating them to do their best. “They love you for it,” she says. “This is the last time before adulthood we can give them a skill and confidence they can take with them. Many students come back to visit because we have made a real difference in their lives.”

Volcano Vista’s elective PE program features weight training, yoga, aerobics, team and individual sports, as well as skiing, rock climbing, camping, bicycling, and other activities.

SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:
- Demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns.
- Applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance.
- Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.
- Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.
- Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.

Program Team

Amy Suman, PE Teacher, Strength & Conditioning Coach, Yoga Instructor, Staff Wellness Lead
Ronald Francour, Weight Training Teacher, Strength & Conditioning Coach
Debi Nord, PE Teacher, Lifetime Sports Teacher, Boys Track Coach
Samantha Lucero, PE Teacher, Team & Individual Sports Teacher, Girls Soccer Coach
Todd Flores, PE Teacher, Department Head, Assistant Baseball Coach
Kevin Andersh, PE Teacher & Baseball Coach
Chad Wallin, Team & Individual Sports Teacher, Football Coach
Amy Lou Dowd, PE Teacher, Team & Individual Sport, Strength & Conditioning Coach

SHAPE America’s commitment to put all children on the path to health and physical literacy through effective health and physical education programs. Across the country, HPE teachers and other supporters are making an impact by taking action in the following areas:

- Effective Instruction
- Healthy Behaviors & Physical Activity
- Advocacy

Want to know how you can make an impact? Learn more at shapeamerica.org/50million.