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A positive (top)spin on education

Chinese volunteers help a charter school in St. Louis form a table tennis team ... and teach lessons in life.

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ST. LOUIS

A small white ball pops back and forth between corners of a table in the basement gym, fixing the children's attention with its rhythm steady as a metronome. The demonstration by two competitive young table tennis players gives these novices something to aim for.

Ranging from third grade to eighth, about 30 students at Confluence Academy's Old North St. Louis campus have recently formed a new sports team, with the help of a volunteer who played competitively in China. One of her first lessons: Please don't call it ping-pong.

"My first reaction was, 'Oh, it'll be fun,' you know. I loved playing ping-pong growing up," says the charter school's principal, William Polite. "My next reaction, once we got started, was, 'Wow, this is a serious sport here.' ... They're really learning ... the kind of focus it's going to take for it to really become a competitive program."

Like other urban principals, Mr. Polite is always on the lookout for experiences "outside the regular element that [the students] see." Nearly 90 percent of the 700 kids are from low-income families, many with single parents, so school stays open late into the afternoon and from mid-August until the end of June. That leaves room not just for intensive reading and math, but for music, art, Spanish, and after-school activities such as basketball, and now table tennis, too.

"It's something they can use all their lives," says Susan Uchitelle, the founder of Confluence Academy and chair of the board. "It ties in with achievement: They have to concentrate, have agility ... practice for hours. And I think if they can become successful, it will transfer over to ... academics." It's also a low-cost sport that can be played year-round.

Ms. Uchitelle first learned about the sport's potential during a dinner party with St. Louis area resident Sheri Xu and her husband, Jonathan Yao. Ms. Xu was the junior champion in Shanghai at age 11 and has coached her sons for competitive play.

The Confluence team is a first for the St. Louis public schools. But it's not the only place where a link has been made between table tennis and the opportunity it offers for kids to learn life skills. Since 2001, the American Youth Table Tennis Organization (AYTTO) has been working with low-income children at various sites in New York City and New England.

Like the Confluence program, AYTTO provides quality equipment so students can master essential skills. "It's very important to get the children understanding early on that there's a proper grip ... and in order to play correctly you have to be able to produce spin on the ball," says AYTTO director Ben Nisbet. Eventually, some top-level players might emerge, he says, but the goal is much broader. Among the 30 steps the students are expected to progress through, "They have to learn the rules, they have to respect each other, they have to officiate a match, and they have to be a team player."

For the children in St. Louis, what stands out so far is the joy of learning a new sport. "I think it's going to be pretty exciting, because my mom used to play tennis, and I think it might be in my blood," says third-grader Taylor Powel.

"It's fun, and I get to be a part of a team, and it's my school!" fifth-grader Gerardo Rojas adds proudly.

Seventh-grader Rachel Turner says she's playing "because it's different and I wanted to try something new."

Students line up and mimic the motions of Alex Yao and James Wang, a competitive player visiting from China. Then each gets a turn at the table, where he or she learns how to hold the racket (don't call it a paddle) and make contact with the ball. After her turn, a girl runs up to Xu and breathlessly exclaims, "I only lost one ball!"

Second-grade teacher Danny Bellew is one of four staffers trained by Xu over the past few months to become coaches. Practice sessions happen at least twice a week, and will likely extend to Saturday afternoons at a recreation complex downtown. Already he's seen the activity's links to skills needed in the classroom.

Table tennis has sparked a turnaround for one fifth-grader in particular who was getting into trouble in school, Mr. Bellew says. "I took some time out whenever I had a chance to tell him,... 'If you don't make the right choices in the classroom, you're not going to be able to be a part of this.' And I have never seen him so focused."

Whether it's a musical instrument or math or a sport, "We're just trying to help these kids find out something that they're good at and help them hone their skills," says phys ed teacher Brad Slinkard, who felt as though he was back in football camp when Xu started putting him and the other coaches through their paces.

The petite Xu says she's impressed with the support the students receive at school. She can already see that some have a natural proclivity for the sport, but it will take about six months to see if they are seriously interested in practicing enough to become competitive.

Confluence Academy has three campuses and plans to build a high school, where there could be a table tennis team for today's youngsters to grow into. The hope for now is that students will practice enough to be able to compete at local clubs or at other city schools if more teams spring up. There's even some vague talk of a possible table tennis scholarship at Lindenwood University in nearby St. Charles, Mo.

As a mathematician, Principal Polite is dreaming up a way to integrate math lessons and table tennis. And he envisions some of his students someday flying abroad for a competition.

"If I get two kids out of this who take it to a whole other level, then it's success to me," he says.

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