
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Class-Action CrossFit

Rancho High School in Nevada started using CrossFit for P.E. in 2010, and the success of the program now has 10 other schools following suit.

By Laura Bruner

April 2014



Michelle Van Buren

Just outside the bright lights of the Las Vegas Strip is Rancho High School, where 61 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Nevada has the third-lowest graduation rate in the United States, and to help change that, Rancho High receives federal funding assistance due to Title I status. But it wasn't until a P.E. teacher decided to bring CrossFit into her classroom in 2010 that real change occurred.

1 of 4

A year prior to Michelle Van Buren's first CrossFit P.E. class in 2010, the school's graduation rate was at 50 percent. In the three years since, that number has gone up to 58 percent. The change has not gone unnoticed by parents, teachers, counselors and members of the community at Rancho High School.

In 2011, when the federal government awarded the high school US\$1 million through the School Improvement Grant, some funds were allocated to the CrossFit program to help pay for training and equipment. Van Buren had already built a successful program with CrossFit, and administration saw a need for the affiliate to grow at the school.

Rancho CrossFit eventually became a fully functioning nonprofit affiliate equipped with a pull-up rig, barbells and plates.

No Detentions Required

Rancho CrossFit is housed in a small room at the back of the school. The room is immaculate, the equipment is well cared for, and the workout for each day of the week is written up clearly.

Van Buren teaches five CrossFit classes each day, and after three years of CrossFit-only P.E., the need for discipline in her classes has vanished. The students are on time for class and attentive. They love being there and sometimes come to school solely so they can go to CrossFit.

“When I come here, I get to escape every stress I have going on in life, work out and be with my friends.”

—Eddie Calahan

“I don't even have to instruct them at the start or finish of class anymore,” Van Buren said. “They get on each other's case if any equipment is left out or mistreated. They are proud of this class and happy to be here.”

Van Buren's CrossFit class has a waiting list, as she can only handle so many in each session. The students who are able



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After developing their skills in P.E., some of Van Buren's students competed in the Teen Gauntlet in Los Angeles, Calif., in 2013.

to attend said they feel fortunate to be there—which is obvious when the bell sounds.

“I wait all day for CrossFit class,” said student Eddie Calahan. “When I come here, I get to escape every stress I have going on in life, work out and be with my friends.”

Tyler Aitken, another student in Van Buren's class, said he frequently gets a pass out of seventh-period science to come back for a second CrossFit class.

“If I can get all my work done, my teacher will write me a pass to come back to Coach Van Buren's CrossFit class,” Aitken said. “I love being here because it gives me energy and I get to work out with my friends.”

As someone who never enjoyed or excelled in traditional P.E., Aitken said he's found a place at Rancho CrossFit. And he's flourishing.

Van Buren, the lone coach at Rancho CrossFit, said it's students like Aitken who make all the hard work worthwhile.

"I teach five classes throughout the day and then stick around for CrossFit club after school," she said. "Once the hour for club is over, the kids always stick around. They don't really have anywhere to go, and they have found a home here."

Van Buren also devotes several weekends a year to travel to various local competitions the kids can participate in. And with the CrossFit Games Open underway, Rancho CrossFit has 18 students testing their fitness.

"We have been waiting for this for over a month," junior Francisco Rangel said of the Open. "I love CrossFit. When I work hard in here, I see it pay off. Someday, I want to be like Jason Khalipa."

During Open Workout 14.1, the room was filled with excitement and high energy.

"They push each other to be their very best," Van Buren said. "They want to be role models for each other, and they aren't afraid to coach each other in every workout."

The Payoff

Rancho High has experienced a shift in priorities: The members of Rancho CrossFit work hard not only in the gym but also in academic classes.

**"I love CrossFit. When I work hard
in here, I see it pay off."**

—Francisco Rangel

"I like to think of my assignments like they are a CrossFit workout," said Elijah Abram, senior and Rancho CrossFit Club president. "It has helped me a lot with my mental strength and not being lazy."



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A CrossFit P.E. program focuses on sound basic movement mechanics, giving students the tools to maintain and improve their fitness throughout their lives.

These blurred lines between fitness and academics have many parents and teachers believing CrossFit is having a positive effect on graduation rates, attention spans and overall discipline at Rancho High.

“I like to think of my assignments like they are a CrossFit workout.”

—Elijah Abram

“When I was a sophomore, I was getting some A’s, mostly Bs and a few Cs,” Abram said. “But since I started CrossFit, I am getting all A’s, and I will be going to the University of Utah in the fall and studying physics to eventually go to (medical) school!”

The desire to help others through medicine stemmed from his new love of CrossFit. After learning about a healthier lifestyle for himself, Abram encouraged his mom to try a



Michelle Van Buren poses with her athletes at the 2013 CrossFit Teen Gauntlet in Los Angeles.

few new things. Due to some disabilities, she has a hard time doing physical activity.

“Elijah did some research and has put her on the Zone Diet,” Van Buren said. “I think she lost between 20 to 30 lb. because of it.”

Getting Everyone on Board

Teachers and administrators are slowly coming around as they notice a change in students’ attitudes.

Last year, Clark County, home to Rancho High, was awarded a Community Transformation Grant of \$2.4 million. In a district that continues to receive government funding to improve numbers, word is spreading about the success of Rancho CrossFit. Now, 10 other schools are using grant funds to implement CrossFit.

Van Buren will be providing support to help the program grow across the district.

“Who knows?” she said. “Maybe next year we can have the whole district come together to compete in the Open.”



About the Author

Laura Bruner works for CrossFit Inc. to bring CrossFit and education together through her work with schools, teachers, administrators and affiliates. She also is a trainer on CrossFit’s Level 1 Seminar Staff and a coach at NorCal CrossFit in San Jose, Calif. Email Laura@CrossFit.com with questions or thoughts about CrossFit and education.

Courtesy of Michelle Van Buren