On a crisp October morning, 20 Grade 3 students at Wild Rose Elementary School in St. Albert, Alta., stood in a hushed hallway, gripping brightly hued plastic golf clubs in their tiny hands. One by one, the group sent colourful foam balls skidding across the linoleum floor.

As they putted their way around the school, they zipped past classrooms full of their schoolmates bent over math and French textbooks, and across an imagined green in front of the principal’s office. The students had to follow one rule, says phys-ed teacher Jennifer Messenger: Do not disturb the other students. However, the kids were enjoying the indoor game too much to risk spoiling the fun. “You could hear a pin drop,” she says.

That was two years ago, when Wild Rose Elementary was one of 13 schools to test a pilot version of the National Golf in Schools Program, which was officially launched in spring 2009 and is now running in more than 500 elementary schools across Canada.

The program was developed by Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada) in partnership with Golf Canada (the new name of the Royal Canadian Golf Association) and the Canadian Professional Golfers’ Association. “We really believe that it contributes to the development of physical literacy among children and is definitely a resource worth using,” says Sharon May, director of programs at PHE Canada. The innovative program offers kids the chance to improve their physical fitness and familiarize themselves with a game they might never otherwise play. If a child’s parents don’t golf, chances are they won’t, either.

“Unless you introduce them to golf, they won’t take up the sport. So the best place to start is schools,”
says Scott Simmons, executive
director and CEO of Golf Canada.
“It’s just a no-brainer that if you’re
trying to promote grassroots partici-
pation and create awareness and pas-
sion for the game, you would start at
that level.”

Schools that participate in the
program pay $175 for a package that
includes lesson plans, training games
and child-friendly golf equipment:
plastic clubs, foam golf balls and flags
to mark the course. The total cost of
the program is $475 per school, but
Golf Canada subsidizes the balance as
part of its plan to quadruple the num-
ber of participating schools by 2012.
In a perfect world, Simmons says, the
program would make its way into all
of Canada’s 10,000 or more elemen-
tary schools, which is Golf Canada’s
ultimate goal.

If golf wasn’t offered at Wild Rose,
Messenger believes many of her stu-
dents would never swing a club. With
a variety of income levels, there are
some kids who could not afford to
step foot on the links. “It’s so nice to
have a program where they are all on
equal par,” she says.

The 28-year-old teacher sees golf
as a perfect fit with the province’s
phys-ed curriculum goal—to help
children stay active not only in school
but throughout their lives. “Golf is a
sport you can play well into your
80s,” Messenger says.

Last fall, gym teacher Andrew Oli-
ver brought the golf program to East-
view Public School in Oakville.

As an avid golfer, Oliver was
keen to share his passion for the
game with his students. He soon had
them chipping and putting in the gym
and creating a nine-hole course on
the playground. He sees it as an ideal
game for kids who don’t naturally
gravitate to team sports.

One of Oliver’s students, a boy in
Grade 6, usually hovers alone on the
fringes of the playground during
lunch, watching other kids play foot-
ball and basketball. While the boy has
a hard time integrating socially with
other kids, Oliver says, he thrives on
the fairway. “He found his calling in
golf, I suppose. His dad came to me
to say how his son is talking about
nothing else but golf at home.”

Until the National Golf in Schools
Program was introduced, only a hand-
ful of the elementary school popula-
tion in Canada had been exposed to
golf, says May. “Children should be
exposed to as many different sports
and activities as possible,” she says.

Although some parents may think
of golf as more recreational than edu-
cational, May says the sport actually
promotes a wide range of phys-ed
goals, such as the development of
hand-eye coordination and balance.
And, she says, it encourages kids to
spend a few hours walking outdoors.

While it is too soon to have any
quantifiable data on the program’s suc-
cess, May says the participating
schools are raving about its popularity.
And for Golf Canada, this positive
word of mouth within the school-age
set is part of a secondary goal:
cultivating future elite players.

“The more people you get involved at a grassroots level, the more opportunity these kids have of developing through to the higher level of the program,” says Gary Bernard, executive director of the Canadian Professional Golfers’ Association.

But when the students at Sooke Elementary School on Vancouver Island tried out the program, they weren’t thinking about becoming the next Mike Weir or Michelle Wie. Instead, their imaginations were focused on turning the field behind the school and a pile of gym equipment into a Pebble Beach-quality golf course.

“We used cones for trees and skipping ropes to mark off water hazards,” says teacher Dale Morrison.

Golf hasn’t just given kids the chance to turn their playgrounds into courses, it has helped some to better integrate into school. Those who never join in a lunchtime sport are now happily working on their follow-through.

Want to find out more about the National Golf in Schools program for your community? Visit nationalgolfinschools.com, or contact Golf Canada at 1-800-263-0009.