P.E. teacher Tyson McGuire leads his class in warm-up exercises and stretches at MacArthur Elementary School. He also coaches high school basketball, cross-country and track at Liberal High School. L&T photos/Rachel Coleman

149 a day: That's how many students P.E. teacher Tyson McGuire works with at MacArthur

By RACHEL COLEMAN

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When the third-grade students arrive in the MacArthur Elementary School gymnasium, the quiet line dissolves into a giggling, arm-whirling mass of energy. Students who have complied with the rules, raised their hands to speak, and respected the private space of others finally have a little room to move.

It’s time for P.E.

The half-hour session could be an exercise in chaos, rather than a time to exercise — except for teacher Tyson McGuire, who gains control of the exuberance within moments.

“Go to your spots quietly,” he tells the children, before he outlines what class will involve. Because it’s the final week of March Madness, the NCAA basketball championships, they’re going to work on basketball skills. Before the children separate into groups at four stations in the small gymnasium, McGuire reviews the various athletic events scheduled for the week — a golf tournament, the high school track meet and more.

“If you get an opportunity, try to go to one of those events,” he tells his students. Then, “give me five laps. All the way around the corners.”

The children take off, then settle on the floor to stretch.

McGuire earned the USD 480/Liberal Area Chamber of Commerce Teacher of the Month award for March for his work as P.E. teacher at MacArthur, as well as coaching basketball, cross-country and track at Liberal High School. As he instructs this, the eighth P.E. class of the day, it’s easy to see why he has earned high praise from principal Shawna Evans, parents and peers.

As the children break into four basketball stations, McGuire coaches them about how to perform a proper bounce pass, how to throw a good chest pass, where to stop and shoot the basketball.

“You’ve gotta make a good pass for the other person to catch it,” he tells them. “If you concentrate, you’ll have a good pass. If you get in a hurry, you won’t. Count and see how many in a row you can do without dropping it.”

The gym soon resounds with the hollow whap of ball-passing and footsteps.

“I do not want you running,” McGuire warns as he rebounds basketballs for students at the shooting station. He scans the room, keeping an eye on the more rambunctious students, pauses to examine the eye of a crying girl who missed a pass and took the basketball in the face. Soon, he claps a rhythmic beat.

“Rotate!” he calls, the children pause, and everyone moves to the next station.

McGuire began teaching P.E. this fall, after three years in the second-grade classroom at Southlawn Elementary. When his teaching partner retired, he felt it was an opportunity to give physical education teaching a try.

McGuire loved the connections that developed with students who he taught for an entire day, every day. The rhythm of P.E. teaching is different: he works with 149 children each day.

“I absolutely love it,” he said. “I plan to stay up to date in my other certifications — I wouldn’t rule out going back to teaching in the future — but this is great, too. The lesson plans are simpler. I can teach 100 percent of the time, coach 100 percent of the time.”

As one of the two men in the building — the other is a school counselor — he’s aware that he

might be the only male authority figure in the daily lives of children growing up in single-parent homes. McGuire understands; his parents divorced when he was young, and he grew up traveling back and forth from Liberal, where he attended Lincoln Elementary and West Middle School, and Pratt, where he graduated high school.

College was complicated for him, he recalled, starting with two years at Pratt Community College, some time at West Texas A&M, and a degree from Fort Hays State University. In the process of deciding what he wanted to do with his life, McGuire kept returning to memories of how various teachers helped him.

“I very passionately wanted to be a teacher,” he said.

As a young child, he struggled with a speech impediment. He carries fond memories of a kindergarten teacher who provided extra help and encouragement so that he’d overcome the challenge.

“It wasn’t until high school that I realized what an impact that had on my life,” he said. “If I could do that for one kid, I would feel successful.”

In his everyday work, McGuire focuses on giving kids a chance to get moving, stay healthy and perhaps let off steam. He doesn’t see P.E. as an “extra” or “special” class, but something fundamental and necessary. Besides helping them develop physical abilities, P.E. teaches fairness, teamwork, decision-making. It can also improve grades.

“There’s been a lot of research that shows, the more active kids are, the better they do academically,” he said, noting that the trend carries over into upper grade-levels. That’s why he makes a point of telling students about high school sports events.

“For a lot of kids, that may be what keeps them involved instead of dropping out,” he said. “That’s the main goal, helping them get their education.”

The students who gather up the colorful basketballs and stack the zone-dividing cones neatly for the next P.E. class aren't thinking about that, however. They're happy about the pass tally — one pair of girls performed 79 chest passes before dropping the ball — and ready to get a drink of water.

"Keep quiet as you go through the hallways," McGuire reminded them as they lined up to leave the gym. "People are taking tests. Have a great day."

The students, a bit sweaty but full of smiles, seem ready to do just that.