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Central principal wins national award



February 9, 2012 00:02:00

BARRIE - Barrie Central's Russ Atkinson is such a mind and body coach, The Learning Partnership named him one of Canada's best principals.

Atkinson lives the high school's motto: Work conquers all. And that work can be bookwork or lab work or music work or a workout.

He equipped students and parents to fight to keep the school not only open during an accommodation review last year, but also fights to keep its spirit up as the aging school building risks essential systems failures.

He inspires staff and students to care for their minds and their bodies – to not just ensure they get the best out of life, but they can be their best.

“It's very humbling, honestly. You look at the letters people wrote, and it's humbling,” said the biology teacher-turned principal.

“I still go in to teach from time to time. I like it. It's fun. I've taught courses from Kindergarten to university.”

Growing up the son of a teacher, Atkinson graduated from Barrie Central. His mother inspired both him and his sister to pursue careers in education – and ever-active Atkinson has always believed exercise conditions the mind as much as it conditions the body.

Living in Clearview Township, he rides his bicycle 15 kilometres four times a week, sometimes outside on his bike outfitted with studded tires to stop him slipping on the ice, or on his stationary cycle indoors.

“The Greeks knew all about this and we're just rediscovering it. I've always been an active person,” he said,

adding Central's phys ed department chairperson is of like mind and encouraged Atkinson to explore research by Harvard medical professor Dr. John Ratey.

"As educators, all of us want to help children be successful to the best of their ability. I'm fortunate to be in a position where I can support excellent teachers," he said.

A few years ago, he and his math department made strides in raising the school's EQAO scores. It was such an improvement, Atkinson was awarded the Dr. Bette Stephenson Award.

"Our school has a tradition of excellence in drama, music and sports. I'm just trying to move that onto the academic side, and we're becoming more responsive to the most recent research on brain development and cognition and utilizing that information to improve student success and performance academically and physically," Atkinson said.

The school created Phoenix Action 4 Life, a program designed to get kids moving, and moving at a pace that benefits their heart and their brain.

Throughout his career as a principal, a career that began at Bradford District High School, Atkinson has mentored 12 vice-principals. He is serving as chairperson of the Ontario Principals' Council.

Atkinson has also extended relationships to Elde College in the Netherlands – with projects that include Remembrance Day ceremonies and a robotics project – and a South Carolina school district.

"One of our colleagues in the Carolinas got a federal grant. Fifty per cent of students are obese. That's every other kid," said Atkinson. "It's so bad, they have to buy special furniture for these kids. Why not get them moving more? It's an incredible story. It makes sense."

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