

A different start to the school day

High school students warming to the idea of daily exercise before class

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If you were asked to define any teenager's typical school day, the words "exercise" and "learning" would rarely be mentioned. However, the students at Eastdale Secondary School in Welland, Ont., have taken a different approach to start their school day. Fourteen students have traded in their pencils and calculators, at least for the first part of the day, in favour of heart rate monitors and treadmills.



Jesse Stockton, 17, is blogging for CBC News about how the class is doing. (John Rieti/CBC)

I'm Jesse Stockton, a 17-year-old, Grade 12 student at Eastdale. This year my school launched a pilot program called Sparking Life Niagara for a class of Grade 10s, and I've been asked to help document their progress.

The 13 students in the class are all struggling academically. Sparking Life Niagara aims to help them improve their marks by having them work out for 40 minutes every day before starting classes. The program, designed by Harvard Professor John Ratey, explores the connection between exercise and the human brain's abilities.

It seems an obvious, dare I say simple, philosophy. But it's not.

The hardest part of this new and improved approach to learning is the fact that you are preaching to a generation of teenagers who grew up in a social media world. Exercise and learning are often put on the back burner in the lives of most teens and adults.

I admit that exercise and learning are not my top priorities either. So it is not a surprise that at first glance, I was skeptical of this program. I wasn't sure how teenagers would adapt to the idea.

It was not until interviewing some of the students involved that I really started to understand the goals of the students. "It's already improved my grades a bit, I feel more motivated to be in school," said 15-year-old Robbie Dilts. "People need to exercise and make something of themselves. Video games hold you back."

"I think (the program) is very important. It's a huge help and keeps me alert," added Jacob Connors, 15.

However, at first, the motivation and enthusiasm in the fitness room matched that of a high-school English classroom at 8:30 am on a Monday morning. After a series of tests to identify both the body and the mind's strong points, there was some confusion - the teacher, Ms. Garratt, and others in the class weren't sure about how the program was going to unfold over the semester.

After the first week, I was left believing that this program was going to be a disaster.

Class growing, getting better at workouts

But as the days went on, word got around Eastdale of the new way of learning, and enrollment in the program quickly grew to 11 boys and two girls — up four from the first day of classes.

These additional students seemed to "spark" the motivation of the others in the program. Many who at first felt no need to participate now cheer on fellow students as they strive complete personal goals set earlier in the semester. Some students have picked their favorite workout machines and stick them, while others switch it up on a daily bases. Some students have even went as far as to pick "work out buddies", people they talk to every morning while working out on the machines.

How far the students will progress academically is still unclear. However, every single student involved has gotten better at their workouts since the first day. What started as joking and goofing off with friends has now turned into sessions where most students enjoy strapping on their heart rate monitors.

If the program succeeds at Eastdale, it could spread across the entire Niagara region and eventually all of Ontario.

I'm in my last year of high school, and I've never seen anything like this at Eastdale. It is something new, something exciting, something beyond the chalkboards. But most of all, it's something that could not only become a way of learning, but a way of life as well.

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