

download your local community  
news app. [click here](#)

metrolandmedia  
inspiration for community



NIAGARA *this* WEEK.com

[Visit full site](#)

[Home](#) ▶ [News](#)

'Miracle-Gro' for the brain



May 18, 2011 00:05:00

Niagara could be the first region in Ontario to implement a new physical activity program in high schools that, if as successful as it's hoped, could lead to dramatic improvements in students' mental health and ability to succeed in the classroom.

It could also have the added benefit of chipping away at obesity rates among kids that experts say are approaching epidemic levels.

The Region's public health department, Niagara's Catholic and public school boards, and the Niagara Sport Commission have teamed up to launch a pilot project called Sparking Life Niagara at Lakeshore Catholic High School in Port Colborne and at Eastdale Secondary School in Welland starting next September.

The project is based on ground-breaking research by Dr. John Ratey, a Harvard University professor of psychiatry who has extensively studied the impact that aerobic activity has on students' physical and mental health, and their performance in school.

Dr. Jessica Hopkins, associate medical officer of health for the Region, told the Region's public health committee on Tuesday that similar programs at high schools in Chicago and Saskatoon have yielded startling improvements in students' grades and ability to read and write. The Chicago high school also has one of the lowest obesity rates in the United States.

The new program will see students in one class in each of the two local high schools take part in intense, 20-minute workouts at the start of the school day, possibly with ‘bursts’ of activity throughout the day. Baseline literacy and math skills will be scientifically measured, as will students’ physical health.

In a video clip from CBC’s The National shown at the meeting, Ratey said exercise has been proven to help “neurogenesis,” the growth of new brain cells. “There’s nothing that we know that does that better than exercise,” he said.

Erin Lotherington, vice-principal at Eastdale Secondary School, said Ontario teens are required to have only a single phys-ed credit in high school, and most teens take that in Grade 9.

If the pilot program works as expected, Sparking Life Niagara could be rolled out to high schools across the region.

Dr. Robin Williams, chief medical officer of health for the Region, said she was hopeful the results will be dramatic.

“It looks like it’s (exercise) Miracle-Gro for the brain,” she said.

With regional statistics showing nearly 32 per cent of Niagara teens are overweight or obese – far higher than the provincial average of 20 per cent – having daily aerobic activity could also help turn the obesity tide, Williams said.

“We’ve been chugging away on the obesity for ever and ever,” she said. “We need some new approaches.”

Hopkins said the exercise could also improve teens’ mental health by decreasing symptoms of depression, anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. That’s also key in Niagara, because no less than 10.3 per cent of people in Niagara age 15 or over report having attempted to commit suicide, compared to the provincial average of 7.8 per cent, she said.

