

## Schools taking fitness action

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### Schools in action

**Saskatoon:** Five years ago, Saskatoon special education teacher Allison Cameron stumbled onto something that is changing the lives of students. While teaching an elementary behavioural class, she invited a couple of kids to run with the cross-country team before school. She noticed they became calmer and more focused in class. A year later, she joined City Park Collegiate Institute determined to

test the hypothesis that exercise helps concentration and behaviour. Using donated treadmills, stationary bikes and heart-rate monitors, she put her Grade 8 class on 20 minutes of cardio three mornings a week, and strength training the other two. Not only did behaviour improve, their grades did too. Now the whole school is on her Movement Matters regime, and Cameron helps schools across North America develop similar programs.

**Toronto:** Dagney Gardiner's class at James S. Bell public school in Etobicoke has already travelled as far as Alberta this year — on four treadmills and four stationary bikes. Eighteen students in Grades 6 through 8 use them for 20 minutes each morning while monitoring their heart rates in a program called Back on Track. Gardiner, sparked by Cameron's work in Saskatoon, launched her program 18 months ago with eight boys in her behavioural class. A little more than a year later, average literacy scores for that group had jumped to 73 per cent from 64 per cent; numeracy to 72 per cent from 65 per cent. Before the program, the group had amassed 39 suspensions; since it began they've had four.

**Milton:** Three Halton region schools have been testing how exercise helps learning and attention in an initiative called Youth in Motion. Launched more than a year ago by school boards, public health, police and the City of Milton with a grant from the province, the pilot project involves students at E.C. Drury High School, Bishop Reding Catholic Secondary School and Brookville Public School. About a dozen students at each high school are elevating their heart rates on cardio equipment for 20 minutes a day. At Brookville, all students are doing a range of daily aerobic activities. In June, they will collect data measuring the impact on academics and student engagement in hopes of inspiring other schools to initiate programs.

**Niagara:** A pilot project called Sparking Life is set to begin next fall at Eastdale Secondary School in Welland and



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Students at James S. Bell public school in Etobicoke use treadmills for 20 minutes each morning in a program called Back on Track.

Lakeshore Catholic High School in Port Colborne. The initiative by Niagara Region Public Health, two school boards and the Sport Commission of Niagara, will include about 15 at-risk students in each school, who will start the day with 20- to 30-minute workouts on cardio equipment. Students will be assessed before and after the school year on literacy and math scores, emotional health and resiliency, attendance, engagement in school and extracurriculars, fitness levels and disciplinary incidents. They hope eventually to measure results against a control group.

**Barrie:** Russell Atkinson says the research on how exercise boosts learning is too compelling to ignore. That's why the principal of Barrie Central Collegiate Institute is determined to introduce mandatory cardio to his 1,000 students in a pilot project beginning this September. The school has joined forces with the local YMCA, public health and parks and recreation department to create the Phoenix Action for Life Movement, and has applied for a two-year grant from the Ontario Heart and Stroke Foundation to cover costs of training, equipment and heart-rate monitors. Dr. John Ratey of Harvard Medical School visited Barrie with his team in March, and this summer the Phoenix group hopes to attend his four-day workshop in Massachusetts on incorporating exercise into school.

***Andrea Gordon***