

Phys. Ed linked to academic success

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From left, St. Anthony co-ordinating teacher Michelle Deen gets active on exercise balls with students Shawn Genest and Ronald Coffman, principal Marnie McDermott, students Sarah Vander Ploeg and Dawson Fillion.

Photograph by: Wil Andruschak, Back to School

Alex Frazer-Harrison, For Back to School

The buzz of a pre-recorded whistle over the loudspeaker tells students at St. Anthony Congregated School it's time to start a new exercise.

But we're not talking practising times tables — the exercises here include stair-climbing, pedalling a stationary bike and working out with a bosu ball. It's all part of a new initiative launched school-wide last year that incorporates 20 minutes of moderate physical exercise into the start of every day, above and beyond standard phys-ed classes.

"We came across a book — Spark by Dr. John Ratey — that promotes how exercise is connected to learning," says Principal Marnie McDermott. "That you get your heart rate moving and it gets your brain ready for learning."

St. Anthony is a Grade 4-7 school for children who have delays, for various reasons, in subjects such as reading and math.

But the idea of introducing a fitness circuit before the start of class every day — in which students

spend a few minutes at a station before moving on to a new activity — is something other schools are now investigating, says McDermott.

“In the gym, we have a modified game like basketball, but you’re running all the time,” says coordinating teacher Michelle Deen.

“We have workout videos in one of the rooms upstairs — everything from dance to yoga. One of the portables has the (stationary) bikes and bosu balls. Every day, there’s something different.”

But is it working?

“I feel good after the exercise, and it helps me with stuff out of school and in school,” says Grade 6 student Dawson Fillion. “If you have extra energy, you can let it out instead of being in your seat.”

Adds Grade 5 student Sarah Vander Ploeg: “Sometimes, I want to sleep afterward, but it helps me learn. We wear a heart-rate monitor, and you click the button and tells you what it is.”

The watch-like monitors are an added bonus in St. Anthony’s grant- and donation-funded initiative, and Deen says this allows the morning exercise to cross over into other subjects, such as tracking students’ progress through graphing in math class.

Four schools in the Calgary Catholic School District are currently engaged in similar morning exercise programs, says Jessica Badzgon, health and physical education consultant with the CCSD.

“There’s a ton of research to support the importance of physical activity in academic success,” she says. “Getting kids engaged in cardiovascular activity prepares the brain to work — it gets them set for the day. It’s like when you’re going to go out for a run, you stretch your muscles first.”

A June 2011 report by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) and the Public Health Agency of Canada says 8.6 per cent of kids aged six to 17 are considered obese.

But the report shows rates of obesity among young people actually dip in urban areas such as Calgary compared to rural areas, says CIHI program consultant Lisa Corscadden.

“It starts becoming an access thing,” she says. “Where you live has to do with the chance of having a healthy weight. Places that are more urban — there’s more opportunity to have physical activity, and more fresh fruit and vegetables at a reasonable cost.”

The latest standards advise kids participate in 60 minutes of physical activity per day, says Bev Robinson, learning specialist with Learning Innovation at the Calgary Board of Education.

“Before, it was 90 minutes,” she says. “It was thought (60) was a bit more doable.”

Alberta Education’s 2010-11 Daily Physical Activity Policy calls for 30 minutes daily of school-organized physical activity for grades 1 to 9. That leaves a half-hour that parents need to consider.

But the 2011 Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth

shows only nine per cent of boys and four per cent of girls get the full hour, yet they spend six hours of “screen time” daily outside school.

Robinson says role-modelling by parents is important, as is taking an active interest in the physical activity kids undertake before and after school.

“It might be a case of parents having their kids come to school on their own energy — walking or biking instead of just being dropped off,” says Robinson. “Add music to activities — some kind of active music increases how much people will move.

“It’s important to listen to kids about what activity they like. If they’re not into regular team sports, there’s lots of activities out there for kids, such as mountain biking, zumba, even cricket and lacrosse.”

There’s a heightened awareness of the importance of physical activity for kids, says Joelle Turner, fitness director with the Eau Claire YMCA.

“We want to take them away from that five-six hours every day watching TV and chatting online, and not being outside,” she says, adding studies show physically active high school students are less likely to engage in negative behaviour such as smoking.

“The benefits are not only physical, but psychological,” Turner adds. “There’s social development, hard work, the idea that persistence pays off — it reflects life.”

Not every school has after-school sports programs, but facilities such as the Y are always available, she says.

Any activity in the crucial 3 to 6 p.m. after-school hours “is better than none,” adds Leah Yardley, co-ordinator of the Be Fit for Life Centre located at the University of Calgary.

“There’s a huge part we’re just getting into — physical literacy,” she says. “And that starts at age zero. From that point, till they’re 11 or 12, they learn fundamental movement skills, but the problem is many children aren’t learning those skills.”

By encouraging children engage in physical activity out of school, they’re not only going to gain this physical literacy, but they’re learning good habits that will last a lifetime, says Yardley.