

blog

That inspiring feeling

Student Jesse Stockton blogs about the Sparking Life Niagara program, a pilot project where a class of Ontario students works out every day before class

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Posted: Dec 2, 2011 5:57 PM ET

Last Updated: Dec 2, 2011 5:56 PM ET



Blogger and Eastdale Secondary student Jesse Stockton. (John Rieti/CBC)

How many teachers do you know that not only teach, but inspire?

We are constantly yearning to find inspiration, and the word is tossed around a lot these days. But the Sparking Life Niagara program at Eastdale Secondary School in Welland, Ont., is truly inspiring people to make healthy lifestyle changes.

The Spark program was designed by Harvard psychology professor John Ratey, whose research suggests that starting the day with exercise before entering the classroom can lead to academic and behavioural improvements. Eastdale is one of the schools trying the workout program to see how effective it is.

And when it comes to making legitimate lifestyle changes, the students taking part in the school's program are not the only ones being inspired.

Adam Ventnor, a 35-year-old Law and History teacher at Eastdale, became motivated to lose weight once faced with the realization that his habits were becoming dangerous to his health. Unhappy at 261 pounds, Ventnor put together a weight loss program by himself.

"Operation 180 is about getting down to 180 lbs in 180 days. By achieving this, I will be turning my health around 180 degrees," he told me with a smile.

The motivation to change his lifestyle was simple.

"As you get older, age scares you and you have to accept the fact that you are getting older. Your habits become more dangerous. Your age and weight impacts you more," Ventnor said.

"When you are young, you have a lot of time. Before you know it, that time disappears and true responsibility creeps in. It is then that your bad habits start to show."

Ventnor has lost 55 pounds so far. He says he's also more motivated and energetic when he's in class teaching.

Ventnor believes the youth of today struggles with obesity due to greater social isolation, which can be widely blamed on the spread of modern technology. However, he also uses social media to his advantage. Ventnor uses Facebook to motivate him to continue towards his weight loss goals.

"I use social media to motivate myself," he said.

"Each week I take a picture of the scale and use it as my profile picture for my Facebook profile. If I have a bad week or fail a weekly challenge, everyone will see. With social media, there is a built in support system waiting for everyone."

Ventnor believes the Sparking Life Niagara program has a strong chance to work, as long as the students stay motivated.

"The Spark program has tremendous potential. The key to its success is that the students have chosen to be a part of it ... they have to want to be in the class," he said.

"If the students in the program experience success, that success becomes contagious."

The age effect



Sparking Life Niagara student Robbie Dilts works out on an exercise bike.

(John Rieti/CBC)

Many of the students found Ventnor's approach to weight loss inspiring, as well.

"It's amazing," said one student.

"Everybody was impressed, but his program sounds really hard," said another.

"It seemed to happen so fast, one day he just walked in and he was so skinny. It happened so quick!," said a third I spoke to.

However, Ventnor cautions that results won't always come quickly.

"Today we seek immediacy so often," he said. "This affects all aspects of our lives. If people do not see immediate results, they often give up. It takes time. You must delay gratification. That patience will pay in the end."

The Spark students agree.

"I know the Spark program has a chance to change my life for the better. It can help both in the classroom and the workout room," said one student.

"It won't happen overnight, I know that," remarked another student. "I want to be fit when I have my own family, and eventually teach them all the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, too."

Both the Sparking Life Niagara and Ventnor's 180 program have only been going for a short time, and it's far too early to say how effective they are in terms of making people healthier and better learners. But the results are encouraging, and both Ventnor and the Spark students say they are motivated and will continue to strive for healthy lifestyle changes.

Ventnor also had some advice for anyone willing to adjust the way they live.

"When changing your lifestyle, you have to realize that it is bigger than you," Ventnor said.

"It is amazing how many people are struggling with the same issues. Involve people in your life in your weight loss ... we are not islands."

The students have some ideas, too.

"Just do not listen to people's opinions about yourself," added Nick Mckeen, 15, one of the Sparking Life Niagara students. "If you want to lose weight, you need to want to in your heart and your mind."

As a student who's not in the pilot program but who is watching it closely, I can't help but feel inspired when I see Ventnor and the Sparking Life students overcoming adversity and making healthy lifestyle changes. Hopefully the feeling spreads, both to teenagers and adults.

So while the word inspiration is tossed around a lot, what defines the word can be found at Eastdale Secondary.