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Mikayla Law-Heese, left, defends against Brayden Pitre, centre, as Brendan Keeler, foreground, looks on during their early morning exercise program at Regency Acres Public School in Aurora.

AARON HARRIS/FOR THE TORONTO STAR

## Where are they now? Teacher's exercise program working out

December 26, 2011

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FAMILY ISSUES REPORTER

At 8:30 on a weekday morning, the kindergarten corral is buzzing at Regency Acres Public School. Despite the crust of snow, 5-year-olds zoom around on tricycles, little legs churning. Others run, jump and skip.

This isn't just random schoolyard chaos. It's their daily 20-minute session of vigorous activity to start the morning, part of a school-wide initiative to get young brains ready for learning.

Inside, the Grade 5/6 class bursts through the doors of the gym for their daily exercise. Today, it's high cardio basketball. The class also runs regularly and has an unusual goal – to cross Canada, by totalling the distance each student covers throughout the year. The teachers have a goal too – to create a more focused classroom, by firing up the students' brains by elevating their heart rates.

But wait, the action is far from over. As soon as their 20 minutes is over, the Grades 8s swarm in for sprints, jumping jacks and four-on-four basketball.

This Aurora school is a lively place these days. And teacher Jennifer Burt couldn't be happier. In the span of one year, the special education teacher has spearheaded a movement to get every class in the school exercising daily. Her project has been so promising that it has caught the attention of educators as far away as Massachusetts.

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As the *Star* reported last May, it began last year as an experiment with one Grade 6 class. Dubbed Fit for Life, the program called for daily exercise delivered during twice-weekly gym classes and, on the other three days, through 20-minute morning aerobic sessions.

Burt wanted to see if daily exercise would affect academic performance. Well, it did, across the board. Class literacy levels improved in the fitness group noticeably more than among Grade 6 students in the two other classes. So did learning skills recorded on reports cards, and individual reading and writing scores.

Classroom teacher Norma Moffitt reported less absenteeism and disruptive behaviour, and more participation and focus. She said she hadn't seen anything as effective in 22 years of teaching.

By spring, preliminary results had convinced principal Cathy Martino-Porretta that all of the school's 480 students should be on board.

To achieve that goal, daily physical activity had to be slotted into classroom timetables from kindergarten to Grade 8, and the whole package coordinated to provide everyone access to the gym, playground and equipment.

"It was very tricky, but it's doable," says Burt. "You just have to make it a priority."

She says all of the teachers have introduced the program, though they haven't yet achieved 100 per cent compliance every day.

"They had heard about the difference it makes, and now they are seeing it in their classrooms."

Burt, a runner, had long been interested in how exercise affects learning. Then a couple of years ago she stumbled on the book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* by Harvard psychiatrist Dr. John Ratey.

Little did she know that soon Ratey would stumble upon her. Ratey, who argues that aerobic activity is "like Miracle-Gro for the brain," has been leading a movement to get mandatory fitness into schools in the United States.

Ratey read about Burt, who shared her finding in August at a three-day symposium hosted by Ratey's neuroscience research group in Massachusetts.

Word has spread through the York Region District Public School Board and she has also made a presentation to York Region Public Health.

Burt wants to shift school culture and build lifelong exercise habits in students. The school recently approved plans to purchase heart rate monitors to teach the Grade 7 and 8 students about target heart rates.

To keep the kids excited, she urges teachers to change activities constantly. One day it can be a circuit of cardio exercises in the gym while music blares; another it could be scooter hockey or running games like chuck the chicken.

For last year's pioneering class, now in Grade 7, the experiment also became an exercise in team-building. That became clear when the students started a regular 2.5-kilometre run through the neighbourhood last spring. The kids on the cross-country team, always at the front of the pack, would cheer as the last kids trickled back to the school.

By the time they attended the May track and field event, everyone was supporting each other.

"You could really see it, they were such a solid unit," says Burt. "They had gone through something together."

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### Kinda wish we have that....

in high school and university. I had a program like this in middle school, but it was not as well coordinated as this one. (DPA? Daily physical activity) and it was just mostly people sitting/standing around chatting for 20 minutes, three times a week. --- I exercised about 5 times a week back in high school (from team class), but now at university, I've exercised about five times, in five months. Oops.....(Freshmen 15... oh god..)

Submitted by Omokie at 3:13 AM Monday, January 23 2012

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