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Alternative school in Hamilton uses exercise to help students focus

By Kaleigh Rogers, [CBC News](#)

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Every school day, the students at Good Shepherd Notre Dame House School spend the morning at the James Street YMCA. They spend the first half of their morning doing independent exercise: some lift weights, others take a turn with the punching bag and a pair of gloves.

Around 10 a.m., they move into the gym where the whole class plays several rounds of volleyball. They shout, laugh and dive. By lunchtime, they have yet to spend a single minute inside a classroom.

It's not your typical school day, but this isn't your typical school.

Good Shepherd opened the downtown specialty school in 2001. It provides an opportunity to complete high school requirements to students who, for one reason or another, haven't stayed in the mainstream school system.

"Predominantly, our youth would come from a Good Shepherd-related youth service facility," Kathy Lukasik, one of the school's two teachers, explained. She pointed to Good Shepherd facilities that provide emergency housing or residences for teen mothers.

"It's often the kids who have fallen out of school and might be really short on credits. Kids who have maybe been involved with the law and find themselves 17, 18 [years old] with only two credits and you need 30 credits to graduate."

Some of the students face mental health issues. Others struggle with substance abuse problems. Some have left home and had to learn to live on their own while supporting themselves.

They've faced the kind of issues that would bump school to the bottom of the priority list for any young adult.

But at Notre Dame, they get a second chance to complete their high school education while also having access to a variety of resources through Good Shepherd, from counselling, to medical support and opportunities to pursue post-secondary education.

About 30 students are enrolled in the school at a time, each with different credit requirements. Last year, the school had its largest graduating class yet with eight students earning their high school diploma.

'A huge difference'

units that, when completed, earn them a provincial high school credit. Some students can complete a full credit course every month, others struggle to finish the course in a semester, but everyone is allowed to work at their own pace.

And the volleyball helps.

“I think it makes a huge difference in the way they perform in the afternoon,” Tom Montgomery, the school’s other teacher, said.

“If they work hard in the morning getting that energy out, it makes for a much higher amount of work done in the afternoon.”

David Davids, one of the students currently enrolled at Notre Dame, said the chance to work out makes all the difference.

“Doing the gym in the morning definitely wakes me up. This morning I was really tired, like beyond tired,” he said after their volleyball game wrapped up Thursday.

“I didn’t really want to do anything and now I just want to get my work done.”

Davids is currently finishing up his Grade 11 courses and hopes to earn the rest of his credits next year through a chef-training program.

The chemistry of phys. ed.

Notre Dame isn’t the first school to see such remarkable results. High schools in Barrie, Calgary and Saskatoon have implemented programs to increase the cognitive ability of students through physical activity, as have many schools in the United States.

The programs are successful because of the psychological benefits that exercise brings, according to John J Ratey, a Harvard psychiatry professor and author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. He’s worked in collaboration with many schools to implement similar programs.

“With exercise, you’re changing the brain chemistry,” Ratey told CBC Hamilton.

“You’re causing the brain to produce a lot more of the neurotransmitters that affect mood. I always say it’s like taking a little bit of Prozac and a little bit of Ritalin.”

Exercise has the ability to boost mood, cognition, focus, energy and motivation, Ratey said, because the activity causes our brain to release chemicals that calm us down and help us focus.

Ratey wasn’t surprised by the benefits students are reaping from the Notre Dame program, and said evidence supporting these findings continues to grow. He also pointed to the social benefits of team sports like volleyball.

“They learn social cues by failing and trying again, or trying to cheat and having the other team call them out,” he said. “It creates bonding and reduces bullying.”

Lukasik could attest to the benefits, not just for the students but for herself and Montgomery, who both participate in the morning games.

“[It’s] probably similar benefits that anyone would have from working out, but maybe more so for our youth who might be struggling with mental health, maybe some substance abuse issues,” she said, adding many graduates of the program end up continuing the morning routine.

“[The students] must be getting something out of it because they’re coming back and they recognize it.”

Watching the students play volleyball, it’s easy to forget some of the struggles they’ve faced - Davids, 20, said he was in and out of schools as he moved around, sometimes living at home, sometimes on his own.

Like any other gym full of teenagers, they’re competitive, energetic and slightly emotional. But they are learning techniques to handle their emotions and energy so that they can keep playing.

While they may differ from their peers in some ways, just like any other high school student, they want their turn at the ball. They want the opportunity to win.