

Lifestyle program offers kids healthy choices EnCana partners with Region to support school effort

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Tuesday July 6 - Like many parents, Kevin Murdoch was concerned about his kids' health. Too much junk food, not enough exercise.

So he came up with a plan to educate them about the importance of making good dietary choices and being physically active, one that eventually led to the creation of a program that is now spreading to schools throughout Canada.

About five years ago, Murdoch, along with good friend Steve Coons, co-founded Ideas for People and they jointly developed the Lifestyle Journey Program. Although it started as a local project in their home province of Ontario, the program piqued the interest of others. In November, 2003, Encana Corp., in partnership with the Calgary Health Region and KidSport Alberta, launched it as a pilot program in six schools in rural Alberta, including two in Strathmore, Crowther Memorial Junior High and Sacred Heart Academy.

"It was kind of a small idea that just took off and now includes the largest school board in Ontario," says Murdoch. "We started off just a very basic idea to create a program that would help parents and put the ability into kids hands to make healthier choices," adds Coons.

The program consists of two books written for young people aimed at raising their awareness of lifestyle-related health issues, such as healthy eating habits, regular physical activity, body image, peer pressure, dieting and diseases such as cancer and heart disease. Several studies in recent years have indicated that children in North America are, overall, less healthy than their counterparts of past generations. The Lifestyle Journey Program is intended to offer a response to the factors that can negatively influence young people's lifestyle choices. It aims to provide students with the knowledge necessary to identify beneficial choices in both food and activity.

The students literally ate up the program. Carsyn Cain, a student at Crowther Memorial, said recently that one of the best parts of the course was the ability to make her own choice. "Kids like to have freedom and if you have the freedom to make your own choice, you'll probably go for the right one." She also became a fan of healthier foods. "I find that healthy foods taste almost better than junk food."

Her friend Eugenia Chien changed her eating habits after taking the program. "Instead of eating a bag of chips, I will grab carrot sticks and then after that I will exercise more often."

The support of EnCana was crucial to the success of the pilot project. "EnCana supports lots of programs that deal with youth," says Mary Ann Steen, Manager, Community Investment for EnCana. "We look for any opportunity where we can help develop our youth into strong, healthy, productive adults."

"The pilot confirms the interest of young people - and their parents - in health and personal choices," says Richard Musto, Executive Medical Director, Southeast Community Portfolio, Calgary Health Region. "It also confirms that young people already have a relatively good understanding of what those healthy choices are; that tools and resources that are appealing to them and to their teachers are likely to encourage healthful changes."

With the pilot completed, Encana, the Calgary Health Region and KidsSport are reviewing a number of options to try and expand the program in schools or through technology that would enable it to reach kids and their families directly.



Strathmore students are embracing the Lifestyle Journey Program.