



A is for apple, N is for nutrition **Program brings nutrition into school curriculum**

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It's lunchtime at Henderson Avenue Public School and the lunchbags are out in full force.

In Mr. Clement's classroom, some students are enjoying oranges and sandwiches while others are sharing fast food chicken nuggets and miniature chocolate bars -- in other words, a mix of healthy and not-so-healthy options students across the region are bringing to school every day.

Meanwhile, Katie Fuller, a Grade 8 student who is spending her lunch hour volunteering in the main office, is enjoying a brown bread sandwich, a carton of milk and a small Tupperware container of leafy greens.

"I don't know, it just tastes better," the Thornhill student said, when asked why she prefers that kind of lunch.

It's that kind of attitude educators are hoping to instill in more students, particularly those "tween" students in grades 7 and 8 who are just starting to grow concerned about their bodies and how they eat.

That may be why the York Region District School Board is watching with interest what's happening in Jennifer Stewart's classroom.

The Grade 7/8 teacher at Clearmeadow Public School in Newmarket is the first in the region to adopt Lifestyle Journey, a program that aims to integrate nutrition into the regular school curriculum.

"Certainly, it's like trying to push a rope uphill," said Newmarket's Steve Coons, a fitness trainer who, along with local investment adviser Kevin Murdoch, created the program for teachers.

"When you're battling corporations and mass marketing, it's a tough challenge. But the one thing I like to believe is all young people have a natural interest in being well and I think we need to show them how to make that connection."

What that means is taking the nutrition stuff out of health and gym class and weaving it into other parts of the curriculum and encouraging students to talk about their concerns rather than have teachers point to a chart and lecture them about what to eat.

In Ms Stewart's class, for instance, students might read stories from the program workbook during their English period and then discuss the choices made by the characters in the stories or they might keep journals in which they will occasionally write about their diets and snack choices.

"They seem to like it," Ms Stewart said.

"They seem to like the issues that come up with healthy eating. They can talk about what they know, about what's happening in their own lives."

A number of studies released in the past month support the idea nutrition should be given greater emphasis in school.

Obesity rates among children are rising faster than obesity rates among adults, according to a recent survey by the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation. The trend is the result of too much time in front of the TV and computer and too many sugary and fat-laden snacks.

Earlier this week, research in the Archives of Disease in Childhood found children's waistlines have expanded at least four centimetres -- the equivalent of two clothing sizes in the past 20 years, with most of that increase taking place in the past five years.

At that rate, overweight children may soon outnumber their slimmer classmates and go on to develop a host of weight-related diseases, including high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.

Another study released by the Dairy Farmers of Canada this month found that, despite the fact Ontario students can easily identify healthy food choices, they knowingly skip them in favour of soft drinks, French fries and salty snacks, making it all the more challenging for parents and educators looking for ways to ensure healthy eating habits.

It has only been two weeks since students in Ms Stewart's class started using the program material, so it's too soon to tell if this will have an impact on how healthy they choose to be.

But Heather Sears, health and fitness curriculum consultant for the board, said it has high hopes for this program, which has already been introduced in several Alberta school boards.

"I think as a society we're getting there," she said.

"Even fast food places are coming out with alternatives to Big Macs and things like that, so I think there is an increased awareness of a need for healthier choices."

Ms Stewart would agree her students are certainly growing aware of what they're eating and why.

"I have a class where they're very athletic and they look at it from that point of view, that in order to be a better athlete, it's cool to eat healthy foods," she said.

"Whatever motivates them, I guess, is what you have to focus on."

She pauses.

"Well, I don't know if it will ever be cool to eat broccoli," she adds with a chuckle. "But maybe."

Mr. Coons and Mr. Murdoch will be appearing at the Newmarket Chapters store March 27 at 2 p.m. to discuss Lifestyle Journey with parents and teachers. All are invited to attend.