

Less than 60% of Aurora kids are active every day: study



By Brock Weir

Less than 60 per cent of Aurora kids get the physical activity they need every day, according to a needs assessment carried out by the Town of Aurora and Windfall Ecology Centre.

The study, part of the Healthy Kids Community Challenge, was intended to collect information to help the town set priorities in getting kids off the couch and on their feet ? and barriers standing in their way.

Part of the problem, according to the report is the high cost of food in York Region. Findings show that high housing costs in the area, coupled with high food costs ?leaves less income for spending on obesity reducing and preventing activities.?

?Obesity is a key concern to children's health in York Region with 25 per cent of York Region students reported to be overweight or obese in 2013,? reads the report. ?This number is on the rise and has increased from 21 per cent in 2011 and 2009. Research suggests that fitness levels may affect academic performance in math and reading. Physical education may also have a positive impact on student academic achievement.

?Aurora schools were surveyed as part of the EQAO testing and it was found that 44 per cent of Grade 3 students and 47 per cent of Grade 6 take part in sports or physical activity less than twice a week, indicating Aurora is ahead of the Region and the Province?in physical activity.?

Following the report's release on Friday, Brent Kopperson, Executive Director of Windfall Ecology Centre, said the research in the report is a stepping stone to a more active community.

?The community needs assessment has illuminated opportunities to better the long-term health of our kids,? he said. ?I am convinced that acting on our research will lead to a lasting legacy of healthier children for our community.?

While Aurora boasts many amenities, programs and services to keep kids healthy and active, there are a number of challenges that have to be overcome before the Town can achieve its goal of becoming the most active in Canada. The report outlines several barriers, including infrequent public transit, lack of ?spontaneous? neighbourhood play, a lack of program funding, competition between programs, and a lack of education on nutrition and physical fitness that need to be addressed.

On the other hand, their research indicates there are opportunities on the horizon to look at increasing ?Feelings of safety in parks and public areas,? ramping up awareness campaigns on health and wellness, instituting lunchtime play programs and boosting kids' access to healthy foods.

On the eve of the report's launch, many local families had a first taste of the outreach to come with a health and wellness fair hosted at St. Jerome Catholic Elementary School, which brought together stations on physical activity, mental wellness, as well as different tables to introduce kids to different ways to snack healthily ? and opportunities to burn it off through yoga and Zumba demonstrations.

?Healthy eating affects how you exercise,? said Windfall's Gemma Goldstein, local project coordinator for the Healthy Kids Community Challenge in Aurora. ?It also affects your mental health. Your mental health affects what you are eating and how much activity you do. It is all intertwined and we're just trying to get the school healthier in general. We have kids educating kids so they learn and then they teach other kids, and pass that education on.?

St. Jerome was the latest stop on the Healthy Kids Community Challenge circuit. Previous activities have focused on key areas, bringing in sports stars to drive home the message. And it is a message that is gaining traction. In the lead up to the St. Jerome event, Ms. Goldstein says they had over 30 of the students on hand brainstorming and helping set up the event.

?The school has embraced it and that is the reception we have seen from most of the schools in Aurora,? she said. ?They are keen to get their kids healthy because, at the end of the day, the healthier the kids, the happier the kids.?