

Rick Hansen PS is a leader in keeping students healthy and active



By Brock Weir

In a bid to encourage safety and healthy living among students, Rick Hansen Public School, in partnership with the York Region Police and York Region, hosted International Walk to School Day last week.

As students arrived to school, they were met by York Regional Police officers who reminded them about the appropriate places to safely and lawfully walk across the street, and other road safety tips. The YRP was also enforcing the rules of the road with motorists around the school.

"It was a brilliant event," said Hansen PS principal, Steve Gardner. "In terms of community engagement, we brought many people in and there's nothing better."

"We have an incredibly strong relationship with York Region and our public health nurse and from walk to school initiatives to nutrition workshops to being able to bike safety," he continued. "We made that connection right from day one."

Steven Kemp, Director of Traffic Management for the Region, said he agreed that Rick Hansen PS has been a leader in encouraging students to walk and cycle to school.

"We're happy to be here," he said at the event. "Rick Hansen PS is really one of the model schools in the region in terms of getting students to walk and cycle to school rather than having them driven every day. The program here has won some awards and they are doing this today, but they actually do it every week in giving kids the incentive to walk to school instead of being dropped off."

Since opening a year ago, the school has championed its healthy living initiatives among its students, which has made them a recipient of the Green Communities Canada and Heart and Stroke Foundation's Active School Travel Award.

Kemp added that the initiative also helps to ease gridlock.

"From a traffic engineering point of view it's a great thing, because we deal with all kinds of complaints around school zones and pick up and drop off times and if we can just get kids to walk a lot of those problems go away," Kemp explained. "There are just so many good reasons to do it, public health reasons as well."

Const. Laura Nicolle, media relations for York Region Police, said the event has been huge success and that the YRP was happy to be involved.

?This initiative has been a lot of fun, but it has also promoted a lot of really important safety messages,? she said. ?For drivers, there were officers out there enforcing the rules of the road and the speed limits around the schools. We can't stress enough to slow down and watch for children crossing.?

Nicolle said she hopes the event will continue to expand across the region and further.

?It's a great initiative that hopefully gets adopted across the board and the region has actually put together a few fun cartoon videos with safety tips on their website, so parents can have those discussions with their kids and encourage them to participate,? she said.

Const. Nicolle reiterated the three main general safety tips for students walking to school: crossing at a designated crosswalk area, walking instead of running across the road and then making eye contact with the driver, so making sure you see them and they see you.

In addition to their walking to school initiatives, Hansen PS also participates in 20 minutes of activity each morning before classes. Principal Gardner said these initiatives will continue to be embraced, expanded and encouraged by the school.

?Healthy active living is kind of a mainstay and a cornerstone of what we do and what we believe to be important at Hansen,? he said. ?It's what we know and what we do and there's no better way to kick-start learning for period two when instruction begins.?