

Unhealthy schools

Where the ABCs of health are part of the core curriculum

New Brunswick

program aims to promote physical, mental well-being

BY ANDRE PICARD, FREDERICTON

Standing at the front of the class wearing rubber gloves, Tylor Home reaches into a Tupperware container and, with one swift gesture and a sly smile, lifts a pair of bright pink lungs into the air for all to see.

The other students let out a sharp collective squeal — a mixture of disgust and fascination.

Welcome to lunch hour at **Fredericton** High School, where three dozen members of Teens Against Tobacco Use are learning to bring the anti-smoking message to their peers in colourful, captivating ways.

The lungs, Patricia Sullivan explains, are real pig lungs — although they are the same size as those of teenagers. With the help of the students, she hooks them up to a small bellows and, in no time, the lungs are “breathing.”

The process is repeated with a second set of lungs, a black sickly pair that resemble those of a pack-a-day smoker. They are again pig organs, blackened through simulated smoking. The teens notice immediately the breathing is more laboured.

Natasha Sherry, a Grade 10 student, dons a pair of gloves and touches, feeling for a cancerous tumour. The lump startles her and she recoils. “Smoking is so gross,” she says.

Ms. Sullivan, a public-health nurse who works full-time in the sprawling high school, allows herself a small smile. “This is the best part of my job,” she says. “I try to get the students interested and excited about their own health, and it’s really satisfying when it happens.”

Unlike the traditional school nurse, Ms. Sullivan is not on-site to clean and bandage wounds, ice sprains and black eyes, and give kids

their dreaded immunizations — although she does her share. Rather, her role is to do health promotion and education during the important teen years.

“I’m not here to look after the sick; I’m here to promote wellness.”

School, after all, is where children are socialized into adulthood. It’s where they establish good and bad habits — how they eat, how they interact with others, how they love. Establishing healthy behaviours early can have a lifelong impact.

Yet The Globe’s survey shows just over half of boards across the country have wellness programs. Alberta boards had the highest rate at 80 per cent; Manitoba was second at 67 per cent. B.C. boards had the lowest rate, 14 per cent, with Saskatchewan next at 20 per cent.

Lloyd Kolber, a professor of applied health sciences at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, says that “education about health has traditionally been perceived as having little value.”

But that is beginning to change. Children now learn the biology of sexuality by junior high. The emphasis for teens is on relationships, negotiating boundaries and the nitty-gritty of birth control and sexually transmitted infections.

That’s certainly the case in **New Brunswick’s** Healthy Learners program, where public-health officials play an active role in all the province’s schools. Staff, principally nurses, are embedded in school districts and sometimes specific schools, such as **Fredericton** High.

Marlien McKay, **New Brunswick’s** healthy schools co-ordinator, says the program has three goals:

- Helping students acquire the skills and knowledge they need for healthy living;
- Creating a healthy and safe environment in schools; and
- Providing rapid access to nip problems in the bud when they arise.

“We know that students who are healthier learn better,” she says.

At **Fredericton** High, where Healthy Learners was piloted, the results are palpable.

Since 2000, the number of students who smoke has dropped below 10 per cent from more than 30 per cent; the school has banished all junk food from its cafeteria menu, and vending machines now sell only water and juice; there have even been physical changes to the

building, such as the removal of doors where students were often being hit, and the construction of a beach volleyball court and a garden (which replaced the smoking area).

Most telling perhaps is that the number of teen pregnancies has fallen sharply: There used to be so many babies born of students that the school had a daycare centre; it has closed for lack of demand.

With 1,887 students and nearly 200 teachers, administrators and support staff, **Fredericton** High is bigger than a number of **New Brunswick** towns, but it has a unique characteristic — almost all the residents are between 14 and 18.

“It’s a town bursting with energy, bursting with hormones,” Ms. Sullivan says, with a laugh.

With a clientele of teenagers, the public-health nurse focuses almost all her energies on sexual, emotional and mental-health issues. But that consists of a lot more than handing out condoms and providing a shoulder to cry on.

In any given week, Ms. Sullivan will tackle a wide range of cases: do post-abortion counselling, offer contraception advice, patch up broken hearts, intervene to stop bullying and help a student flee a violent home, among other things.

“The kids are great to work with. But this isn’t fluff. They have real, grown-up problems and it’s great that they can get help right at school.”

The nurse’s office, known officially as the health room, is located at a busy intersection near the school’s main entrance. The door is always open and a steady stream of students come and go.

“I’m not here to do first aid, but I do it because I’ve learned that tends to be a pretext for coming through the door,” Ms. Sullivan says. “The presenting problem can be a headache or a sore knee, but the real



problem turns out to be depression or sexual abuse, or fear of pregnancy.”

“... The physical problems are easy to deal with. It's the emotional ones that are a challenge.”

With reports from Rick Cash and Liana Giovando



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BRIAN ATKINSON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Nurse Patricia Sullivan, with Grade 9 student Tyler Home, shows how tobacco affects lungs at Fredericton High School. A pig's lungs are used.