

Yoga comes to the classroom

Athabasca schools hope yoga will help students

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Students at Whispering Hills Primary School (WHPS) and Landing Trail Intermediate School (LTIS) are bending backwards for yoga as part of a pilot project to teach the activity in schools from January until the end of March.

The Yoga in Schools Pilot Project is a joint collaboration between the Alberta government and the Yoga Association of Alberta (YAA).

Funding for the project came through the Healthy Active Living and Recreation Initiatives Project.

The pilot project saw over 3,000 students participate, including the 900 K-7 students in Athabasca.

Both Athabasca schools received 30 yoga mats, relaxation CDs and booklets with yoga poses designed for desks and in the classroom.

The project's goal is to teach students mindfulness that will help them manage emo-



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Certified yoga teacher Pat Cheshire shows students in class 3-2 at Whispering Hills Primary School (WHPS) how to breathe with their diaphragm and stretch during a March 11 class.

tions, improve concentration and apply those skills in situations outside of the yoga studio.

"Yoga teaches us about our body and teaches us to pay attention to it," said Pat Cheshire, the yoga instructor leading the classes at LTIS and WHPS.

Cheshire has taught as a certified yoga instructor for over 30 years and recently retired as a school teacher from WHPS when she was approached by YAA to guide the classes.

After securing the grant, she asked the

WHPS assistant principal Marianne Saunders if the school would be interested in doing yoga again; Cheshire briefly taught yoga at the school back in the fall.

Saunders jumped on board. "Student wellness is so important, physically and academically," she said. "It teaches them self-relaxation and self-motivation."

Once a week since January, students participated in a half-hour yoga class with Cheshire during their regular gym period.

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The key message she emphasizes every class is to breathe.

"I always tell the kids, the breath is with you your whole life. You can access it whenever you need to," she said.

She reminded students that yoga isn't just on the yoga mat, so whether they feel anxious at the dentist, stressed about a school performance, or frustrated with a friend, taking three long breaths will help them relax and keep those "monkey-minds" (as she called it) from jumping all over the place.

Teachers participate in the activities so that when students get out of hand, teachers can use the same breathing exercises and relaxation CDs to help students refocus and pay attention.

After several weeks of instruction, Cheshire has already noticed the students getting stronger, better balanced and appreciating how to relax.

Brooklyn Breckenridge, a Grade 3 student at WHPS, said yoga has helped her deal with upsetting situations.

"It's really calming and teaches you to calm down when you're angry, sad — any emotion," she said.

The calming effect is apparently a potent one.

"When my brother did yoga," Breckenridge remembered, "he fell asleep!"

Another student who managed to stay awake, Lochlan Hefferson, 9, said he felt more confident after yoga.

And, students aren't the only ones learning something new.

Cheshire recalled one student who went home and taught their grandpa how to do a back exercise for his sore back.

Cheshire hasn't heard any negative comments since the project started, but that wasn't always the case. Prior to the launch, Cheshire found skeptics in some of the older boys.

At first they were reluctant to join, she said, but once they learned that teams in the National Hockey League and National Football League — like the Super Bowl finalist Seattle Seahawks — all did yoga as part of their training, the boys were convinced.

The future of the pilot project remains uncertain, but YAA executive director Debbie Spence hopes that positive feedback from the participating districts will encourage more schools to adopt the practice.

"We are hoping that Alberta schools will want to make yoga available to students and staff, based on the success of our pilot project," she said.

YAA will share the feedback gathered from participating schools with other schools in Alberta.

At WHPS, yoga at the school is a bit more secure. Saunders said that Cheshire will collaborate with students and two other teachers to create yoga videos accessible to other WHPS teachers.

For anyone else interested in trying yoga for the first time, Cheshire believes that as long as you can breathe, you can do yoga.

"The simplicity is the beauty of it," she said.