

**Sudbury**

## How physical literacy is teaching Sudbury students the ABCs of exercise

At St. David Catholic Elementary, the third-graders practise throwing, running, jumping, balancing — all part of a program that breaks down the basics of an active lifestyle

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Through their physical-literacy program, students at Sudbury's St. David Catholic Elementary get active outside the gymnasium. (Claude Sharma)

Once morning announcements are finished, the third-graders at St. David Catholic Elementary in Sudbury get active. But, unlike most kids in gym class, they don't play basketball or soccer. Instead, they develop "physical literacy" skills through training in the fundamentals of an active lifestyle.

The first exercise of the day is the snowshoe-hare game: some students crouch and hop around the room while others stand on one leg, creating a human forest for the "rabbits" to go through. By playing both roles, the children work on their balance and leg and core strength. The next activity, a hybrid of hot potato and dodge ball, takes them outside in the snow, where temperatures are hovering around -20.

"If we got hit by a ball, we had to run, jog, jump, and skip — then you can come back in," says eight-year old River Peters. Classmate Folabori Abali's favourite activity is the plank challenge, which involves maintaining a position comparable to a push-up for as long as possible. It's "the most fun," he says. "It builds up your muscles."

All this running, jogging, jumping, and skipping happens under the watchful eye of instructor Terry Moss, a retired teacher who has been working with 13 different classes at nine schools, delivering the program once a week for six weeks at each location.

“If you focus on learning the basic skills of fundamental moving — like throwing, running, jumping, skipping, balancing — then [children] are more apt to be physically involved, physically literate for life,” she says. “They’ve learned all of this at a young enough age, and it becomes ingrained.”

The school’s initiative is part of a larger movement, known as physical literacy, which has a purpose different from that of traditional physical education. “Physical literacy is a more inclusive term, so it tries to catch everybody,” says Drew Mitchell, the director of Sport for Life, the national non-profit that, in 2012, developed the program now being offered in Sudbury. A typical gym class, he says, usually benefits children who already excel at sports and are more engaged in physical activity — but a focus on physical literacy helps build skills appropriate for children of all athletic levels.

Training in physical literacy involves venturing beyond the gymnasium — **instruction happens in the snow, on ice and on water, and in the air.**

“As Canadians, we have a variety of environments. We live in a country that is full of forests and lakes, and we have winter,” says David Inglis, the co-president of the Ontario Association for the Support of Physical and Health Educators. When children develop skills in all these environments, he says, they’ll find it easier to participate in sports and activities later in life.

Sport for Life is partnering with 18 schools in Greater Sudbury, as well as daycares and sports and rec organizations, and with three other Ontario municipalities (Hamilton, Aurora, Chatham-Kent) and 23 communities in British Columbia to deliver physical-literacy programs. In Sudbury, the effort was supported by **a three-year, \$450,000 grant from the Ontario government’s Trillium Foundation.** Other communities across the province, such as **Kingston, Halton, and London,** have also embraced physical literacy — and it forms part of Ontario’s elementary-school and **high-school curriculums.**

Active Sudbury, a group of local community agencies, is facilitating the work in that city. In 2017-2018, the first year of the three-year program, Sport for Life certified more than 1,000 professionals and post-secondary students to deliver instruction. This year, those educators are working with children under the age of 10 in daycares, schools, and after-school programs. Next year, more educators will be certified — the goal is to train 1,600 people. Active Sudbury co-chair Natalie Philippe says that her group will seek other funding opportunities after the final year.

The initiative comes in response to an ongoing public-health imperative. Sudbury has the second-highest obesity rate in the country, according a **2014 study from Statistics Canada**. Martin Dubuc, a professor in Cambrian College's physical-fitness management program, sees the potential for physical literacy to make a difference. "Let's try and give these children the tools so they feel confident in being active," he says. "And, hopefully, maybe 20, 30, and 40 years down the road, we might curtail what we're currently seeing."

And the problem isn't isolated to Sudbury. According to a ParticipACTION report released in 2018, only 35 per cent of Canadians aged five to 17 are reaching recommended physical-activity levels. **A report from the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Centre**, published in October, found that two-thirds of Canadian children "haven't achieved an acceptable level of physical literacy," which the centre notes involves "more than just fitness or motor skill; it includes the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life."

Moss says that one of the greatest barriers to physical literacy is that children and parents alike just don't understand what it involves. Learning about it has led Moss herself to reconsider how she approached her 19-year career as a gym teacher. "I would have taught differently," she says, by identifying and emphasizing the individual skills involved in physical activity.

She's glad to pass her new understanding on to today's educators. "I had one teacher tell me she is going to teach differently, too, because I had been there — and that was only three classes I did with her students."

Moss adds that children seem to look forward to her weekly visits: "I saw a lot of improvement in the students' throwing skills and confidence in playing."

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