

Jets boost plan for mental health

BY JUDY OWEN

It's easier to support a program if a teacher is interested in the topic, believes the material will benefit students and its simple to use.

Suzi Friesen is helping promote Project 11 for all those reasons, plus she has a personal connection to the subject matter.

Project 11 is a positive mental health initiative for Manitoba students in grades 5–8, which is seeking schools to take part in pilot projects beginning in January and September, 2015.

Friesen's mother struggled with mental illness for most of her life. While growing up, Friesen didn't know whom she could talk to about the effect on herself and her family.

If Project 11 had been around, it could have made a difference, she said.

"My mom is well now. She's on medication and she's in a good place. Growing up, my family and I weren't always aware of the supports available and her mental illness wasn't really talked about," said Friesen, who presented on Project 11 at a SAGE session this fall.

"Had Project 11 been something that my teacher could have used, it would have had me thinking and self-reflecting sooner. I would have sought out resources and support systems."

Project 11 was created by the Winnipeg Jets True North Foundation in honour of pro hockey player Rick Rypien, who wore No. 11 for the American Hockey League's former Manitoba Moose and was planning to wear the same number for the National Hockey League's Winnipeg Jets.

Rypien suffered for years with depression and was getting treatment while playing for the Vancouver Canucks. He took his own life in August 2011, just a month after signing a contract with the Jets.

The goal of Project 11 is to create awareness about mental health.

Friesen, a Project 11 co-ordinator, taught middle years in the Seven Oaks School Division.

Her SAGE presentation included video of the easy-to-use, free online resource, which is split into lessons for grades 5–8.

The project's content includes videos featuring kids, experts and local celebrities and athletes such as Winnipeg Jets defenceman Mark Stuart.

There are lesson plans with themes such as stress, self-reflection, friendship and communication, as well as related handouts that can be downloaded.

A fun component is called 'bodychecks', which are daily activities incorporating yoga, laughing yoga, music and rhythm, fun with food, relaxation techniques and aboriginal dancing.

Peter Gow, a behaviour resource teacher in Sunrise School Division who attended the session, said Project 11 would be easy to implement in the classroom.

"I think kids have to learn how to relax themselves because it's a pretty stressful society, even for kids," he said. "We're always on the go."

Gow works with kindergarten to Grade 6 students at Centennial School and said he might apply to be part of the pilot project.

Project 11 is seeking 50 schools from across the province to take part in the first pilot project for grades 5–6 that starts in January. Schools are being contacted in hopes teachers will apply by December 19. Participants will be selected in a lottery type of draw.

"I think it's an interesting idea, an issue that needs to be dealt with in the schools so I'm all for it," Gow said.

While he's aware of some students with mental health issues, not all of them seek help or are easily recognized. That's where a program such as Project 11 could help widen the reach.

"It would hit everybody," Gow said. "Those ones that maybe don't need it, but it would definitely hit all those ones that you don't notice. That's what I think would be good."

When Friesen was teaching, she'd often have co-workers ask her for health-related lessons so she'd dig up what she'd created for her students.

Project 11 now offers a curricular support resource written by former Manitoba teacher Heidi Fingas that's professionally developed and simple to use.

"In some schools, health issues are taught as part of phys ed classes, so this is a way for it to be really easy to integrate into your ELA as well," Friesen said.

"Teachers can play the video and it will guide them through the lesson. It's all right there and it's easy to access. It should be really user-friendly and kid-friendly."

