

Keep calm and Be Empowered: students



By Brock Weir

Life is all about balance ? and if you're a student, you know all too well the challenge in finding the right amount of time for your schoolwork, friends and family.

It can be very stressful, say students at Aurora's St. Jerome Catholic Elementary School, and now they are doing something about it.

Students Alyshia Soans, Grade 7 and Irene Shlensky, Grade 8, returned to school Monday as ambassadors following the York Catholic District School Board's inaugural Mental Health Symposium for Elementary Schools, which was held on Friday.

This event, which was centred on a theme of 'Be Empowered?', aimed to raise awareness about mental health issues, increase mental health literacy, and promote healthy coping and resiliency skills in students across the board. Based on a format similar to their Secondary School Symposium, which was held on Monday, students from across the Board took part in a day of seminars and activities to drive this message home.

But, it is a message that has already been tackled at St. Jerome, where they focus on the concept of 'mindfulness.'

'We have been talking a lot about mindfulness, ways of meditation and keeping yourself calm working on assignments and having a big workload,' says Irene, noting in-school activities, including a big wall of handwritten messages on what the concept of mindfulness means to each student. 'We want to show that everybody is in this together and we are a team.'

'A lot of it is the balance between social life and schoolwork. I always hear how people complain about, 'Oh, I have so much to do but, at the same time, I have to go somewhere and do outside-of-school activities like sports and hanging out with friends.' A lot of times when you have such a huge workload, you tend to mute out everything else, so you forget you have to spend time with your family and that your family cares about you. We are also focusing more on 'Am I going to pass this test? Am I going to get a good mark?' That can be a very stressful situation for students.'

Adds Alyshia: 'We're trying to balance all the things we have to do. We're starting to learn about how to handle stress and how it affects us in our daily lives.'

St. Jerome has done quite a bit of work on mental wellness and wellbeing, so when the Board presented the chance to be a part of a symposium like this, they jumped at the chance, says principal Michele Reaume. Across the Board, schools are putting a particular

focus on 'wellbeing' because it ties directly to student achievement, she explains.

'We find that when students are more mindful, when they are more relaxed, when they have more tools to cope with the things that are being thrown at them every day, they achieve better overall,' says Ms. Reaume. 'The social relationships versus the academics is always a struggle, and has been since the beginning of time. [However,] we find a lot at the school that the rise of social media tends to bring more stress into the school as a social aspect, but the balance and academics is all tied in an that is why we feel a really good, mindful approach in helping the kids not avoid the stressors but [know] how to be able to handle them is really important for that achievement.'

'We define [mindfulness] as being in the present moment,' adds teacher Marisa Benakis, 'not getting anxious about thinking ahead, or being upset thinking back, but staying in the present moment focusing on things like your breathing, being aware of how your body feels, listening to those signals, knowing how to respond, and what you need to regulate what you are feeling at that time.'