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THE BENEFITS OF THE *ÉCOLE EN SANTÉ* APPROACH OF LAC-SIMON ON EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AND STUDENT RETENTION

In the context of this report, we have had the privilege to speak with the instigators of an educational project implemented for over ten years in Lac-Simon's Amik-Wiche High School. Born from the meeting between the school and the community, the *École en santé* program shines both from the socio-educational and the scientific perspective by the recognized expertise of stakeholders involved, by its transferable model and, above all, by its benefits on students. In the form of an interview, this article is the testimony of two major actors in the implementation of this approach, M. Jasmin Cossette, Educational Success Coordinator, and Alexandre Brunet Brault, Teacher of Social Studies and Member of *École en santé* committee at Amik-Wiche High School. Background information and a presentation of the main goals of the project are given; then, a "story of practice" from the interveners consulted will follow. Finally, the conclusion provides a glimpse of the perspectives linked to the educational approach implemented in Amik-Wiche high school, in partnership with the community of Lac-Simon.

To begin, can you tell us about the reasons behind this project? Who were the people involved initially?

*10 years ago, I was [Jasmin Cossette] was coordinator of complementary educational services and of the Guidance Approach. During a provincial meeting, I discovered the *École en santé* approach and I immediately saw the applicability of such an approach within our educational community. From there, the teacher of physical education and health*

*as well as two other teachers concerned by overall health were solicited, which, with myself, formed the first *École en santé* committee of our school.*

At that time, what were the problems in your social and educational environment?

In our school, we had already observed a need for action, and this in the interest of the students, for their physical and mental health. Indeed, for over

The *École en santé* approach's prime objectives are prevention and promotion of healthy lifestyles. Indeed, we believe that we should not wait until problems arise to act; we need to work upstream and long term to achieve sustainable results. Inserted in a three-year strategic planning, an annual success plan is developed by the *École en santé* Committee, in consultation with the school team and community. This strategy encourages reflective practices and allows yearly adjustments overcoming the weaknesses identified and aligned with problems encountered.



ten years, we noticed passivity amongst young people, few physical activities were offered. The majority of them also had poor nutrition. These two observations have been our thinking prompts. According to the logic, we believe that if we work with young people in a right state of mind and body; if we are able to project them into the future, to give meaning to their education, we have a winning formula to support perseverance and academic success in daily life.

Aware that the problem was beyond physical activity and food, we knew we had to first act to equip students with respect to them. Thus, in the second year, we benefited from the collaboration of the Community Health Centre through the expertise of a nutritionist who joined the Committee. Soon, the project resulted in a holistic approach to a multitude of student development factors.



By which means is the project entrenched in the teachers' practices and school life in general?

It should be mentioned that without claiming to reinvent the wheel, it proved essential for us to build on the positive actions already implemented in the school. We first identified and reinvested them in order to incorporate them into a more comprehensive approach which, in a vision of integration, seeks the collaboration of the whole school, in synergy with the community.

From the start, the approach was duly explained to the school team to favour adhesion of its staff, all of whom were and still are consulted cyclically for the development and evaluation of the program. To do this, several work projects are proposed and targeted continued development is offered. Thus all are

familiar with the *École en santé* approach and its main axes.

It is a collective project uniting everyone in the common goal to support young people to develop life skills and expertise aimed at their overall health.

What characterized the educational *École en santé* approach?

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What strategies promote the *École en santé* approach's sustainability?

To be able to re-evaluate the actions implemented in the Amik-Wiche School, to improve them and, above all, to align them with the students' needs, we operate under an annual audit plan. At the beginning of each school year, an action plan is presented to the school team to ensure that all concerned actors are informed of the changes and preferred orientations. These strategies allow an economy of energy, while we avoid breaking down the interventions.

Do you notice some changes in the students' lifestyles?

As the curriculum progresses, we notice a clear increase in student participation in activities offered as part of the *École en santé* program. Their involvement appears as progressive and influenced by a collective passion. We note in this regard that older students inspire younger ones to participate. Certainly, without them being necessarily familiar with the workings of the program, they recognize and appreciate the activities arising from the *École en santé* approach.

Are these activities proposed within the courses or are they rather extracurricular?

We increasingly tend to integrate the École en santé approach within classes, through learning and evaluation situations (LES). We ask for active participation and collaboration from teachers in all disciplines. To do this, we suggest themes or aspects to work according to target directions that they can incorporate into their teaching content. We also invite them to find or even develop educational materials and SAEs about discussed key factors. Numerous original teaching materials have been developed. Through this, we have what we call specific “mass

The identified six key factors are self-esteem, social skills, living habits (diet, physical activity, sleep, etc.), safe and healthy behaviours, favourable environments, and prevention services. In a search for balance, the six key factors are invested in four levels of action: the student, the school, the family, and the community. The objective is primarily to prevent and educate students in a positive way, not to intervene when the problem is already there.

activities” bringing the whole school together: for example, running or athletic activities within the community are offered to all students. These activities are unifying and promote a healthier lifestyle. The effects of the École en santé program therefore thrive inside and outside the classroom. Extracurricular activities are also available outside of school hours.

Following the annual review of our success plan, we currently tend to offer something other than sports to meet the needs of students. Indeed, we notice now that boys are less involved than girls. We are eagerly seeking to develop activities which do not necessarily involve physical effort to mobilize the greatest possible number of boys: for example, culture, science or art- related activities are under development to expand our spectrum of actions.

Within the École en santé program, what means were set up to support the academic success and perseverance of the students?

In ten years, the number of hours of physical activity per week available to students increased from 0 to 20 hours. This gives a good example of the efforts made to catch young people’s interest. Not being able to provide empirical data on dropouts, we know that inside as outside of school, a great number of actions are put in place to motivate young people and encourage them to complete their secondary-level education. To do this, we offer targeted activities based on the students’ interests to create cohesion, a sense of belonging in small groups: for example, the Amik-Wiche en forme project provides indoor training sessions for them on weekdays after school.



In 2008, we surveyed the students in relation to their socio-educational environment. The results showed that they did not nurture their sense of belonging toward the school and they were demotivated. These findings allowed us to offer, along with students, practical ways to remedy the situation. In the 2012 re-evaluation, we noticed an improvement in student responses who felt more involved in their school. The choice of actions depends on their needs and interests. To do this, key actors are always consulted.

To conclude, would you tell us about the transferability and future prospects of the École en santé approach?

We had the initiative to inform the First Nations Education Council (FNEC), which groups 22 communities, of the educational advances made in our

