

## Cirque de l'école

## Flexibility, creativity, goal-setting of circus arts combine for 'nearly magical' results in public school phys ed

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Masked students hang from strands of aerial silk suspended from the ceiling. Some jump on pogo sticks and stand on stilts in the gymnasium. Others practice forward rolls on thick mats that cover the hard floor.

This scene took place at Heritage School on a recent weekday morning — although the set-up could be mistaken for a training camp at Cirque du Soleil.

The elementary school, located near Sturgeon Creek Park in Winnipeg, boasts a full circus arts program, with a certified circus instructor; it's one of 12 public schools in west Winnipeg currently operating or building similar programs for physical education.

"When people think of the circus, they think of red tops and clowns, but it's really far from it," said Dan Sarahs, a phys-ed teacher at Heritage, who has become one of the top circus pedagogues in Manitoba's public school system.

Circus activities, which involve flexibility, creativity, and goal-setting, are ideal opportunities to teach students about physical literacy, otherwise known as the appreciation of and desire to exercise, Sarahs said.

He has seen firsthand how the program has empowered and engaged his students, especially those who are not typically keen on phys-ed class, in the gymnasium.

(Before students pivoted to remote learning May 12, Sarahs offered the *Free Press* a glimpse into his class over videocall. School administrators are limiting in-person visitors amid the COVID-19 pandemic.)

### PUBLIC SCHOOL CIRCUS PROGRAMS IN WINNIPEG

École Robert Browning  
Brooklands School  
Heritage School  
Lakewood School  
Stevenson-Britannia School  
Buchanan School  
Golden Gate Middle School  
George Waters Middle School  
Athlone School\*  
École Voyageur\*  
Sansome School\*  
École Bannatyne\*

\* a teacher at this school has finished the École nationale de cirque online teaching training, but has yet to complete a mandatory in-person component because of the COVID-19 pandemic

Since it first piloted big-top programs five years ago, St. James-Assiniboia School Division has become a world renowned leader in circus education. Researchers from Sweden, Australia and elsewhere have flown in to observe its programs.

A spike in confidence and engagement in phys-ed are only some of the benefits of circus instruction educators have observed in recent years and, in turn, resulted in ongoing support for the programs and continuous expansion.

This fall, St. James-Assiniboia plans to offer circus to high school students for the first time.

Dean Kriellaars, a researcher in the college of rehabilitation sciences at the University of Manitoba, initially convinced the division to take a chance on circus so he could assess how students responded to such programs in 2016.

Kriellaars, who co-ordinates a semi-regular international conference on physical literacy, took interest when a presenter at an event in Banff, Alta., a few years prior spoke about the possibilities of circuses.



A spike in confidence and engagement in phys-ed are only some of the benefits of circus instruction educators have observed. (Supplied)

Little did he know then he would become the scientific director of the world's first research centre devoted to circus arts: the Center for Circus Arts Research, Innovation and Knowledge Transfer at École nationale de cirque in Montreal.

During the 2016-17 school year, Kriellaars and a team measured and compared creativity, resiliency and physical literacy levels among elementary students across four schools with similar demographics and talented phys-ed teachers in St. James-Assiniboia.

What they found was students in the two schools that had started incorporating certified circus instruction into phys-ed had higher competency in overall movement skills, such as hopping, skipping and running, than their counterparts attending control schools.

Creativity, resiliency, and self-esteem levels also improved more in the former group in comparison to the latter by the end of the year.



Trapeze, unicycles, and stilts are among the activities offered in circus in St. James-Assiniboia School Division. The division plans to expand its circus programs beyond elementary and middle schools next year to allow high schoolers the chance to participate. (Supplied)

"High quality phys-ed does marvellous things. Physical literacy-enriched phys-ed does very good things. And then, circus and physical literacy-enriched phys-ed does nearly magical things — and that's befitting because magic is part of circus," Kriellaars said.

Instead of telling children to meet a certain goal of daily exercise, move so they do not get disease or use any other "guilt trip" strategies to promote physical activity, he advocates for showing different ways to be active, so they become confident and competent in moving.

Research around physical literacy has prompted schools to adjust the traditional sports education model in phys-ed to include other activities, such as rock-climbing, biking, and circus.

Between the École nationale de cirque training, which St. James-Assiniboia requires its teachers take if they want to run circus in some form at their school, and equipment, getting a circus program up and running costs around \$20,000.



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Trapeze, unicycles, spinning plates, juggling rings, and aerial cubes, hoops and silk ropes are all part of the circus arsenal in Winnipeg schools.

"(Children) want to experience vertigo on the play structure, and this way we do it in a safe and developmental manner," said J.J. Ross, phys-ed and health co-ordinator at St. James-Assiniboia.

The variety of activities offered in circus means there's something for everyone, while the competitive pressure in win-or-lose sports disappears and makes the program accessible to all, Ross said, noting students work at their own pace and challenge themselves.

"Confident movers are more inclined to move and with competency, you can branch out and do more activities," he added.

The circus station model has proven especially useful for physical distancing this year.



Students at schools that started incorporating certified circus instruction into phys-ed show higher competency in overall movement skills along with improved creativity, resiliency, and self-esteem levels. (Supplied)

The beloved lunchtime circus club at Heritage is on hiatus because cohorts cannot mingle, and the annual year-end parent performance has been cancelled, but until the recent pivot to remote learning, Sarahs found ways to safely continue teaching K-5 students circus throughout the year by constantly disinfecting equipment.

Typically, he starts circus class with some safety lessons, teaches basic skills and tricks, and gives students free time to explore different stations.

"It's a family atmosphere, really — it's not competitiveness all of the time. Kids are helping each other out," said Sarahs, adding circus instruction has also been a "refresh" of sorts for him, a teacher of 16 years.

"If they could, the kids would do (circus) everyday."


maggie.macintosh@freepress.mb.ca

Twitter: @macintoshmaggie

#### **Maggie Macintosh**

*Reporter*

Maggie Macintosh reports on education for the Winnipeg Free Press. Funding for the Free Press education reporter comes from the Government of Canada through the Local Journalism Initiative.

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