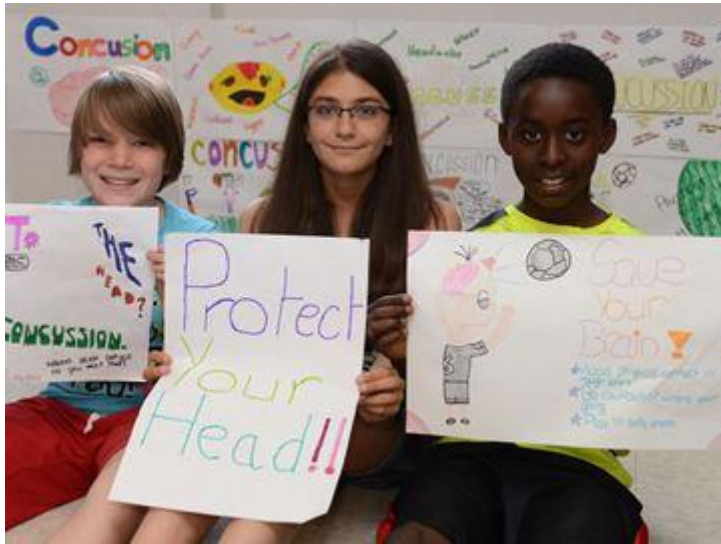


## Halton District School Board implementing concussion education program

*Oakville Beaver*



*Emily Carr Public School Grade 6 students (from left) Curtis Johnson, Joudi Abumarasa and Christian Hines display what they learned this year through the Halton Student Concussion Education Project. The Halton District School Board piloted the program at all of its secondary schools and five elementary schools — including Emily Carr — and will make the curriculum mandatory in all Grade 9 classes beginning this fall.*

Last week, millions of people across the world watched as Urugayan soccer player [Alvaro Pereira refused to come out of a World Cup match](#) despite the fact he had just been knocked out cold.

Pereira had taken an inadvertent knee to the head from an English defender just moments earlier, and laid motionless on the ground for several seconds. Following the match, he would admit to reporters that he had been “unconscious for an instant” and that “the lights went out a little bit.”

Yet, Pereira demonstratively and angrily dismissed his team physician’s gestures to have him replaced, even as he stumbled towards the sideline. Pereira returned to the match just two minutes later.

“I said sorry a thousand times to the doctor because I was dizzy. It was that moment your adrenaline flowing in your body, maybe without thinking...” Pereira, who also played in Uruguay’s 1-0 win over Italy five days later, said after the game against England.

“What I really wanted to do was help get the result.”

That head-injury-be-darned, win-at-all-costs mentality is exactly what the Halton District School Board hopes to help remove from society through concussion education curriculum that will be mandatory for all its Grade 9 students beginning this fall.

The Halton Student Concussion Education Project, a collaborative effort between HDSB staff and Burlington sports physician Dr. Paul Echlin, will be the first of its kind in the province, if not the country or even the continent. The Ontario Ministry of Education has mandated that all boards in Ontario offer similar programming by January 30, 2015.

“All boards have protocols related to managing (possible) concussions under the provincial health and safety physical-education guidelines,” said HDSB associate director Jeff Blackwell. “What’s unique here is we’re teaching kids about it.”

The HDSB piloted the concussion education this past year in all of its secondary schools as well as Grade 6 classes in five of its elementary schools, including Oakville’s Emily Carr. Piloting will continue in Grade 6 classes in the upcoming year, and learning modules are already being developed for Grade 3 classes in the future.

Blackwell said it is essential to inform students about concussions and their potential long-term effects, but highlighted advocacy as the biggest goal of the new curriculum.

“We want our kids to know they have the right to advocate for themselves and keep themselves physically safe and healthy,” he said.

“The awareness, the understanding of long-term effects and the advocacy to say to a teacher, parent or a coach, ‘I think I’ve hurt myself and I want to take myself out of the game.’”

That line of thinking requires societal change beginning at the younger ages, Blackwell and Echlin agreed.

“We’ve validated the epidemic proportion of (concussions). We’ve actually shown it organically,” said Echlin, who has worked as a sports medicine physician and team physician at the NCAA and major junior hockey levels. “Now, we’re intervening educationally to say we don’t have to wait. We have the best teachers in the world, the best resources. Let’s use our best educators to assist in a cultural shift in thought about sport.

“(Sports) is not about how much violence can we incur. Violence is just hurting your opponent, and that was never part of sport,” Echlin continued. “In this next generation, it’s not acceptable.”

Echlin first became involved with the HDSB in 2012 after meeting Joanne Walsh, the board's co-ordinator of health and physical education, at an international summit on concussions. Echlin then began working on an online instruction unit research project with Western University, and HDSB research staff and teachers helped craft parameters to establish how concussion instruction would work in the classroom.

The concussion education program consists of modules that present common head injuries and ask students for the most appropriate response. The modules are reinforced by short videos and discussions.

Emily Carr Grade 6 teacher Andrea Cavaco was pleased with the way her class embraced the pilot program.

"Students were fully engaged in telling their experiences to their classmates and in evaluating the individual responses to the situations based on their new learning," she said in an HDSB release. "Students have been eager to learn about the physical signs and symptoms of a concussion and emotional and cognitive components that can often be misunderstood."

According to results of a Statistics Canada survey released last year, approximately 30,000 concussions or related head injuries are reported annually in the 12-to-19 age group (with 60 per cent of those related to sports activity). That may just be the tip of the iceberg, as experts suggest as many as 90 per cent of concussions go unreported.

Echlin noted children should be given more time and space to recover from head injuries because their brain tissue is still developing. He also said many people are unaware of brain trauma they may have suffered during their childhood.

Blackwell said introducing curriculum education as early as Grade 3 allows youngsters to learn about potential head injuries when it affects them most.

"When you compare the number of kids as they move through the grades that continue to play competitive sports and sports that have collisions, those numbers decrease," he said. "Just look at the playgrounds. One hundred kids screaming around the playground and always knocking heads and falling down. Grade 3 will be a really important place."

"The fundamentals of cultural shift are with education and health. The fact that we're doing both right now is incredibly important," Echlin added. "Hopefully we can show the (professional) leagues it's not okay. We want our kids to be elite and healthy and happy and well-adjusted, and to utilize sports and games for their original purpose. That's the important thing. Allow our kids to feel secure and play these games to the best they can."