



Following their final test last fall, which was a literal trial by fire, students in the new Approaches to Wellness class at Princess Margaret Secondary School posed for a photo.

Special to the Herald

There's a story Penticton teacher Jeff Fitton likes to tell for the benefit of those who wonder about the need for a class on mental wellness that he created for students at Princess Margaret Secondary School.

"I remember seven or eight years ago, this guy from Rotary came and talked to our school and he said, 'If there was a cougar downtown and every year it was killing three or four people, every single government resource would be trying to track that thing down. But we have youth suicides and even adult suicides at a super high rate, yet we're not attacking it with the same tenacity,'" recalled Fitton in an interview this week.

"And that always kind of stuck in my head, and I thought: What if we offered a course that built resilience, persistence?"

It took Fitton a couple of years to put together the unique course now known as Approaches to Wellness, an elective for Grades 11 and 12. The first cohort started in September and has just a few weeks left before the end of the semester.

"The whole course has been about helping design a toolkit for yourself – and if a friend calls you at 1 in the morning and you're in crisis, you've got good suggestions for them," said Fitton.

Grade 12 student Tim Ponto jumped at the chance to take the course after getting a feel for Fitton's teaching style in Grade 11, his first in Penticton after moving here from Prince George.

suicide. (The result comes from surveys conducted every five years by the Macleary Centre Society. The results from 2023 are due out this year.)

“You can ask any teacher, any professional who works with kids: We have seen a precipitous decline in teenage mental health and well-being, and increases in anxiety, increases in depression,” said Fitton.

“It’s not business as usual in schools.”

But rather than focusing solely on the effects of anxiety, Fitton designed the course to give kids the tools they need to manage that anxiety in the modern world.

Topics range from labelling emotions to breathing techniques to developing a growth mindset, and even a Yale University online course on happiness.

And the final test – a literal trial by fire – took place last fall.

Fitton arranged for the students to visit the training centre at Penticton Fire Hall No. 2, where the kids spent two days learning the ropes before taking part in exercises, such as escaping a simulated burning building while blindfolded and loaded down with gear.

The goal of the exercise was to show students they can manage and overcome their fears by putting their newly acquired tools, such as breathing techniques, to work.

“That was really scary for me. It was a lot, especially putting on the oxygen masks. The whole thing felt suffocating,” said Grade 11 student Jordyn Paul-Lauzon

“But it was a good way to learn these strategies (Fitton) taught us in an actual high-pressure situation.”

Grade 11 student Hannah Leduc is just glad someone’s finally paying attention to teenage anxiety.

“Nobody really talks about it and how to deal with it,” she said.

“Just having the tools to deal with it every day is helpful.”

