



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

Ontario Public School Boards' Association
439 University Avenue, 18th Floor
Toronto, ON M5G 1Y8
Tel: (416) 340-2540
Fax: (416) 340-7571
webmaster@opsba.org
www.opsba.org

Michael Barrett
President

Gail Anderson
Executive Director

April 17, 2013

The Honourable Deb Matthews
Minister of Health and Long-Term Care
10th Floor, Hepburn Block
80 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, Ontario M7A 2C4

The Honourable Teresa Piruzza
Minister of Children and Youth Services
14th Floor
56 Wellesley Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5S 2S3

Dear Minister Matthews and Minister Piruzza,

Re: OPSBA Response re: *No Time to Wait: The Healthy Kids Strategy* by the Healthy Kids Panel

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) welcomed the release of this report and the range of recommendations that will promote the well-being of children and youth. This is a priority for our Association and a key issue for school boards where children spend a large part of their day either in our classrooms or in before-and-after school programming. The Education Act, through 2009 amendments, clarified that school boards are responsible for not only student achievement but also their well-being.

We were encouraged to see the establishment of a new inter-ministerial working group that will direct action on implementing the panel's recommendations. Given the intent to draw in support from stakeholders, we strongly recommend that school board representation be included in these discussions. Schools are a natural hub for communities and foster an environment where important conversations about food, diet, exercise, attitudes and learning concerning healthy lifestyles take place.

The report is certainly comprehensive in its review of the current childhood obesity situation and the factors involved. We would suggest, however, that there is scope for deeper exploration of how realistic actions and activities can be applied within the school day so they can ultimately help make real and sustained changes for our children.

We have reviewed the 23 recommendations and have comments regarding those that affect, directly and indirectly, our schools and school boards.

Change the Food Environment

- 2.8 Establish a universal school nutrition program for all Ontario publicly funded elementary and secondary schools.
- 2.9 Establish a universal school nutrition program for First Nations communities.
- 2.10 Develop a single standard guideline for food and beverages served or sold where children play and learn.

OPSBA would most definitely support a universal program for all schools. Right now there are a great number of programs operating in schools across the province. However, these programs have diverse and inconsistent levels of service and support. Some schools have better access to resources, charitable programs and parental support, in terms of both time and funding, than others. Many families cannot afford to provide daily meals and snacks that align with Canada's Food Guide. An equitable, universal, fully funded program would resolve inequities, inconsistencies and offer a solid foundation for all students.

We were pleased to see that First Nations communities were specifically included in the concept of a universal program. Our Association's priorities include a focus on strengthening student achievement for First Nation, Métis and Inuit children and an effective and accessible nutrition program would support this goal.

Since its introduction, OPSBA's member school boards have supported the intent of the government's School Food and Beverage Policy. We recognize that the policy sets standards for healthy eating while allowing schools to have some local flexibility. As noted in your report, there are conflicting policies and legislation that need to be addressed. With the implementation of full day kindergarten, many of our member boards have entered into agreements with third party partners who are offering before-and-after school programming. These operators, along with child care centres in our schools, abide by different legislation. However, the children they serve can attend both the daycare and the school within the same day.

Create Healthy Communities

- 3.3 Make schools hubs for child health and community engagement.
- 3.4 Create healthy environments for preschool children.
- 3.5 Develop the knowledge and skills of key professions to support parents in raising healthy kids.
- 3.6 Speed implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.
- 3.7 Continue to implement the Mental Health and Addictions Strategy.

As noted above, we very much support the concept of schools as community hubs. School board funding includes a Community Use of Schools Grant. Sustaining and expanding this source of funding would allow school boards the flexibility to charge reasonable permit rates and pay for heating, lighting, and cleaning. The goal of bringing community partners together within the hub of a school requires that school facilities, both inside and outside, be affordable and accessible.

With regard to preschool children, we have been extremely supportive of the province's Full Day Kindergarten initiative. In our fall submission, we noted that full day kindergarten is entering its final years of implementation and action is underway to modernize child care; we emphasized the importance of the linkages between the early years in child care centres and schools when considering any strategies and resources. There is a rich body of research that reveals the positive gains for children in early learning programs and it is an ideal time to foster in children the benefits of a healthy lifestyle.

Although the report asks for the knowledge and skills of key professions to support parents, we need to consider as well the adults that our children see more than anyone else during their day. The ongoing challenge is to find effective ways to support teachers in meeting the changing requirements of curriculum. Ensuring that Daily Physical Activity (DPA) occurs in our elementary schools is important and has to be aligned with an integrated curriculum which is infused with healthy lifestyle components. "Add-on" initiatives increase the sense of an over-crowded curriculum and it is important to focus on holistic approaches. Support for teachers must be school-based and have a focus that is centred on students and teachers. Job-embedded professional development strengthens the learning and alleviates the time pressures around training. It is worth noting that Ontario has not yet released a revised Health and Physical Education curriculum or its report on the Crowded Elementary Curriculum that has content highly relevant to the goals of the Healthy Kids Panel. The relevant section of the elementary Health and Physical Education curriculum and all of the secondary curriculum should be released as soon as possible and appropriate professional development should be provided to school staff. We note as well the need to extend professional development support to ECEs and child care supervisors and other staff. Further, we would support a discussion about ways of promoting health and physical education in every year of high school.

Other important partners in the drive towards healthy schools are Parent Involvement Committees (PIC) which are present in all school boards. Together, with school councils, PICs support student achievement and well-being and are a natural place for information to be shared among parents.

We agree with speeding up the implementation of the province's Poverty Reduction Strategy. Launched in 2008, the target was to reduce the number of children living in poverty by 25 per cent over five years. While many positive initiatives have been put in place, poverty continues to be a significant challenge that affects children disproportionately. It is encouraging that the February, 2013 Throne Speech included a focus on poverty and transforming Social Assistance.

OPSBA is a founding member of the provincial Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health and has been very involved in promoting collaboration among sectors during the first three-year phase of implementation of the province's Mental Health and Addictions Strategy. The first phase of the Strategy is focussed on children and youth and the Coalition is a strong advocate for long-term sustainability of supports and services that will build mental health and well-being for all

children and youth. Actions stemming from this report must include mental health promotion in our schools and communities.

The section of the report entitled “Factors Affecting Our Communities” mentions the link between physical environments and healthy lifestyle. We agree that people who live in walkable neighbourhoods are more physically active and school boards do encourage their students to walk or ride their bicycles to schools if they can. School size is not referred to directly, but generally the larger the school, the larger the catchment area and the farther the commute to school, which is a disincentive to walking for families with younger children. Currently in the province many small schools are facing closure and, in terms of healthy school initiatives, it would be beneficial for many of these smaller schools to stay open as long as the program offerings did not suffer. We acknowledge as well that walking to school is not an option in many rural and remote areas and other strategies will be needed.

Another key point we mentioned in our earlier submission was the relationship that schools have with local Public Health Nurses. These professionals have a role in health promotion in schools and we continue to advocate for an increased presence in schools. This strategy further reinforces the emphasis on cross-sector collaboration in the Panel’s report and the tenet that child health is everyone’s priority.

A further suggestion that merits consideration, and might be best directed to the inter-ministerial working group, is to urge each stakeholder (food industry, public health agencies, school boards, municipalities, etc.) to develop a timely action plan aligned with the report’s recommendations

We were pleased to note that there was a representative from a public school board on the Healthy Kids Panel. We would encourage expanded school board representation in any future discussions, especially in respect of initiatives that affect schools and school boards. We believe we have a unique perspective that would make a helpful contribution to the future work of the Panel and will follow up on this request.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Michael Barrett,
OPSBA President