

Healthy Schools Matter



A discussion paper on making *healthy schools* a reality in Ontario

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Introduction

The Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (Ophea), the Ontario Association for the Supervision of Physical and Health Education (OASPHE) and the Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition (OHSC) are three Ontario non-government organizations that share the vision that all children and youth in Ontario will be educated in a *healthy school*.

In November 2007, a working group of representatives from each of these three organizations was developed to move this commitment forward. The working group met a number of times since November 2007 to develop recommendations to make this vision a reality.

On April 10, 2008, Ophea hosted the Healthy Schools Matter Provincial Forum in collaboration with OASPHE and the OHSC. While the primary purpose of this event was to transfer knowledge gleaned through the implementation of the Living School initiative (www.livingschool.ca) over the past 5 years, it was also used as an opportunity to discuss and develop recommendations for moving *healthy schools* forward in Ontario with a wide range of stakeholders. Funding support for the Forum was generously provided by the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Canadian Council on Learning.

Approximately 160 key leaders from the education, public health, recreation, research, media, non-profit, private, and government sectors participated in the Healthy Schools Matter Provincial Forum. The Forum included opening remarks from Pegeen Walsh, Director of the Health Promotion Branch of the Ministry of Health Promotion, elementary and secondary students; a presentation of the Living School experience by Ophea and Bishop Gallagher Sr. Elementary School; a keynote address by Dr. Sofíaleticia Morales of the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization; and a panel discussion featuring Dr. Martin Shain (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health/ Living School Principal Investigator); Larry Ketcheson (Parks and Recreation Ontario); Connie Uetrecht (Ontario Public Health Association); Colin Vickers (Ophea Board, Retired Director of Education); Louise Brown (Education Reporter, Toronto Star) and moderated by Dr. James Mandigo (Brock University). The afternoon was dedicated to a facilitated discussion that led to identification of key priorities and recommendations to make *healthy schools* a reality in Ontario. Video and written proceedings of the Healthy Schools Matter Forum are available at www.livingschool.ca.

This discussion paper includes a summary of key priorities and recommendations developed by Ophea, OASPHE and the OHSC based on the discussions of the working group and the results of the Healthy Schools Matter Forum. Specifically, six critical success factors have been identified to make *healthy schools* a reality in Ontario.

Critical Success Factors to make *healthy schools* a reality in Ontario

1) *Shared leadership and responsibility among key sectors, namely, education, public health, and sport and recreation.*

Many individuals and organizations have a stake in *healthy schools*. They include: students, families, teachers, principals, school board administrators, public health professionals, sport and recreation providers, community and provincial organizations, businesses, and governments.

Shared leadership and responsibility would be manifested through enhanced cross-sectoral collaboration and partnerships at the provincial, regional and local level.

2) *A clear and common vision for healthy schools shared by Government and key stakeholders*

The term *healthy schools* is gaining support within Ontario, most notably since the release of the *Foundations for a Healthy School* framework¹ by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health Promotion in December 2006. The concept of a *healthy school* includes the notion of creating healthier children and youth and healthier communities. As outlined in the Canadian Consensus Statement on Comprehensive School Health (2007), “*this comprehensive approach integrates responses to several health and social problems and promotes the overall health and learning of children and youth, as well as adults who work in and with schools, parents/caregivers and surrounding communities.*”²

There are a number of initiatives and organizations that support *healthy schools* in Ontario. These include provincial government initiatives such as Healthy Food for Healthy Schools, Safe Schools, Community Use of Schools, Daily Physical Activity, the Health and Physical Education curriculum (which is currently under review), Student Engagement, Parent Engagement, Character Development, the Childhood Obesity Strategy as well as several provincial and local initiatives that are implemented at a school board, school and community level. There are also many competing “priorities” within the education sector, most notably literacy and numeracy. There is a need for stronger linkages to be made between these priorities.

There is a need for a common vision for *healthy schools*. While shared responsibility is needed, government leadership and support particularly from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health Promotion and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services are critical to give the vision for *healthy schools* “value and weight” among diverse stakeholders. Endorsement and alignment towards this vision by key provincial organizations representing stakeholders within key sectors is also of high importance.

¹ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/healthyschools/foundations.html>

² http://www.safehealthyschools.org/CSH_Conensus_Statement2007.pdf

There is also a need for consistent messaging and targeted awareness building. This would help to ensure that all stakeholders have a clear and common understanding of the concept of *healthy schools* and how *healthy schools* can result in healthier communities and better health and learning related outcomes for Ontario's children and youth.

The *Foundations for a Healthy School* framework provides a philosophy and framework for *healthy schools* in Ontario. This framework could serve as a starting point for:

- Consistent messaging related to the concept of *healthy schools*.
- The development of policies and legislation at the provincial, regional, and local levels that would support implementation of *healthy schools*.
- Better alignment of existing and new policies and initiatives in Ontario that address the various components and health issues outlined in the *Foundations for a Healthy School* framework. Consistent messaging about how various policies and initiatives can be integrated into *healthy schools* is also needed.

3) *Clearly articulated process steps to achieve the desired outcomes outlined in Foundations for a Healthy School.*

While school communities may have very different priorities and desired outcomes within the *Foundations for a Healthy School* framework, there are common process steps needed to initiate and sustain *healthy schools*. These steps, which are supported through research and best practices including the evaluation conducted on the Living School initiative, are:

- Community engagement and consultation to identify a shared vision for a *healthy school*, priorities, assets, goals and a clear level of commitment from stakeholders from a number of sectors including education, public health, recreation, and others.
- Establishment of a *healthy schools* team or workgroup that includes representation from students, families, educators, and community partners including public health, sport and recreation providers, police, local businesses, and others to champion the planning and implementation of activities. Existing structures such as School Councils, Safe Schools Committees, Student Councils, Heart Health Partnerships, and others should be leveraged wherever possible.
- Development and implementation of an action plan based on priorities within the *Foundations for a Healthy Schools* framework. Existing planning processes such as the School Effectiveness Framework should be leveraged in this regard.
- Evaluation and celebration of progress and outcomes.

These process steps need to be clearly communicated and supported province-wide. Specifically, the following are recommended:

- Share knowledge among key stakeholders to develop a common understanding of what is already happening, what is working, and what is missing at the provincial, regional and local levels and use this knowledge to define a clear process to implement *healthy schools*.

- Provide training, capacity building, and mentoring opportunities for educators and school community partners to support implementation of the process at a regional and school community level. The School Health Guidance Document that is being developed to support the implementation of the newly revised Ontario Public Health Standards is a key asset that can be leveraged in this regard.
- Provide access to resource materials and consultative support to help school communities identify existing community assets and quality supports, and use available resources more effectively.
- Provide opportunities for knowledge exchange, networking and sharing of information such as success stories and overcoming challenges. Considerations include: list serves, teleconferences, regional and provincial forums, development of communities of practice, etc.

4) *Dedicated and sustained funding and support at the provincial and school board and community levels to implement and maintain healthy schools structures and processes across the province.*

While the benefits of *healthy schools* are tremendous at the provincial, regional and local levels, these benefits will not come without some costs. Dedicated funding would also provide status and accountability to implement *healthy schools*. Considerations include:

- Provision of incentive funding to build regional partnership structures between school boards, health units, sport and recreation providers, and others and mobilize existing assets to establish effective local structures to initiate and sustain *healthy schools* (e.g. *healthy schools* coordinating committees or action teams).
- Provision of funding and support for school communities to implement the process to become a *healthy school*. Considerations may include increasing teacher release time to support healthy schools initiatives, dedicated staffing support at a school board/regional level and school community level, enhancing access to “specialists”, creating “positions of responsibility” with a stipend and time granted to coordinate healthy schools, encouraging creative human resource solutions such as secondments or shared staffing between school boards/health units/recreation providers, and enhancing opportunities and building capacity for student leadership/youth engagement.
- Provision of funding and support for school communities to implement a tangible plan of action to become a *healthy school*. Considerations may include funding for school nutrition programs, healthy food subsidies, equipment, facility upgrades, use of other community facilities, community access to schools, support services from education, public health, sport and recreation, social services and other sectors, etc.

5) Assessment, monitoring and evaluation at the school community and board level to ensure accountability and promote continuous improvement

Accountability is important to ensure that “things get done”. Assessment, monitoring and evaluation at the school community and regional level would be important for fostering accountability to implement *healthy schools*. Assessment, monitoring, and evaluation would also help to build a body of knowledge related to *healthy schools* on a provincial, national and international level.

Key considerations regarding assessment and evaluation include:

- Providing standard assessment tools based on the *Foundations for a Healthy School* framework to facilitate action planning at a school community level. Standardization of assessment tools would also support planning at a regional and provincial level (i.e. identification of trends and gaps and support monitoring of progress over time).
- Ensuring that evaluation methods and tools are sufficient to measure results but are not so rigorous that they become barriers to the implementation of *healthy schools*.
- Including measures that support priorities of the education sector such as student achievement. Preliminary studies conducted in Ontario (e.g. Living School) and across Canada (e.g. Quality Daily Physical Education) show that increasing time spent on physical activity and health has no negative and possible positive impact on literacy and numeracy. Additional research in this area is needed.
- Providing funding and support for school communities who have committed to assessment, action planning, monitoring and evaluation.
- Enhancing recognition for school communities including a *healthy school* “accreditation” based on their commitment, process and progress to achieve the objectives outlined in their action plans.
- Making connections to other assessment and evaluation strategies at a provincial and national level (e.g. Joint Consortium for School Health).

6) Establishment of a healthy schools office or department to ensure central coordination, maximize resources and avoid duplication

Central coordination is required to support effective and consistent implementation of *healthy schools* across the province. The example of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat could be considered in this regard. Central coordination should focus on fostering provincial level, cross-sectoral partnerships needed to address the critical success factors described above. Central coordination would contribute to systematic capacity building of all sectors and ensure that existing quality provincial and community initiatives and structures such as the Ontario Health Promotion Resource System and in particular the Curriculum and School Based Health Resource Centre, Public Health, School Boards, Community Sport and Recreation, Tobacco Control Area Networks, Heart Health Partnerships, Safe Schools Committees, School Councils, Student Councils and others as appropriate would be leveraged in order to maximize resources and avoid duplication.

Conclusion

Ophea (Ontario Physical and Health Education Association), OASPHE (Ontario Association for the Supervision of Physical and Health Education), and the OHSC (Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition) are committed to working together and with other organizations to ensure that all children and youth in Ontario will be educated in a *healthy school* and have improved health and learning outcomes as a result.

It is hoped that this discussion paper will be used to build alliances, partnerships, and support to make *healthy schools* a reality in Ontario.