

Chapter 4

Ministry of Education

Section 4.03

Healthy Schools Strategy

Follow-up to VFM Section 3.03, 2013 Annual Report

RECOMMENDATION STATUS OVERVIEW

	# of Actions Recommended	Status of Actions Recommended			
		Fully Implemented	In Process of Being Implemented	Little or No Progress	Will Not Be Implemented
Recommendation 1	4		0.75	3.25	
Recommendation 2	4		0.75	3.25	
Recommendation 3	1			1	
Recommendation 4	1		0.25	0.75	
Total	10	0	1.75	8.25	0
%	100	0	18	82	0

Note: The partial numbers in some cells occur from recommended actions being implemented to different degrees by the Ministry and the three school boards we audited.

Background

The increasing incidence of overweight children in Canada has become a significant public concern. Nearly one in three students is overweight. About 12% are considered obese—almost twice as many as in the late 1970s. In 2012, the Ontario government set a goal of reducing childhood obesity by 20% in five years.

The Ministry of Education (Ministry), which has primary responsibility for developing and supporting the implementation of policies and programs related to students in publicly funded

schools, has established the Healthy Schools Strategy to support students' learning and growth through proper nutrition and physical activity. In this endeavour, the Ministry relies on the support of other government ministries, such as Health and Long-Term Care and Children and Youth Services.

Ontario's 72 publicly funded school boards operate almost 4,900 elementary and secondary schools with an enrolment of approximately 2 million students. At the time of our follow-up, the Ministry had spent about \$7.8 million over the three fiscal years 2012/13 to 2014/15 (\$5.8 million over the three fiscal years 2009/10 to 2011/12) on activities related to healthy eating and daily

physical activity initiatives under the Healthy Schools Strategy.

In our *2013 Annual Report*, we found that the Ministry had developed a policy that set out nutritional standards for food and beverages sold in publicly funded schools, and had revised the school curriculum to require that all elementary students get 20 minutes of physical activity each day during instructional time. However, we found that the Ministry and school boards needed to put more effort into ensuring compliance with these requirements, and they needed to work more effectively with other organizations and stakeholders, including parents, to share effective practices for encouraging healthy living and increased physical activity throughout the system.

Our key observations were as follows:

- Neither the Ministry nor the school boards we visited had effective monitoring strategies to ensure that food and beverages sold in schools complied with the nutrition standards in the Ministry's School Food and Beverage Policy. Officials at the three school boards we visited had not reviewed the food and beverages sold in their school cafeterias to ensure they met the nutrition standards.
- Our review of a sample of menu items at one school board identified a number of items that did not meet nutrition criteria in the food and beverage policy, some to a significant degree.
- Both the Ministry and school boards visited had limited data to assess whether the School Food and Beverage Policy contributed to better student eating behaviours. After healthier food choices were introduced, secondary school cafeteria sales at the three school boards we visited decreased between 25% and 45%. Vending machine revenue also dropped between 70% and 85%. Secondary school principals we spoke with said many students were choosing to eat at nearby fast-food restaurants instead of choosing the healthier foods offered in their school cafeteria.
- There was no formal monitoring by the Ministry, school boards and schools we visited to ensure students in grades 1 to 8 had the 20 minutes of daily physical activity during instruction time as required by the Ontario Curriculum. Two of the three school boards we visited conducted surveys of school representatives, and more than half of those who responded said that students at their schools did not get the required 20 minutes a day.
- The Ministry's requirement for physical activity at the secondary school level was much lower than it was in some other jurisdictions. In Ontario, students had to complete only one credit course in health and physical education during their four years of high school. In Manitoba, students had to obtain four such credits to graduate, and in British Columbia, students are expected to participate in at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week.

We made a number of recommendations for improvement and received commitments from the Ministry and the school boards we visited that they would take action to address our recommendations.

Status of Actions Taken on Recommendations

According to information received from the Ministry and the three school boards we audited in 2013, little or no progress has been made on most of our recommended actions, and few are in the process of being implemented. More effort is needed to implement the recommendations in our *2013 Annual Report*, which were aimed at encouraging healthier eating and more physical activity among students. However, the Ministry noted that it is planning to work with Ontario's school boards to review the effectiveness of the School Food and Beverage Policy and Daily Physical Activity Policy to help ensure maximum results for Ontario's learners.

As well, we did notice some noteworthy efforts, as described below:

- In 2014, the government committed to a long-term government goal for children and youth to have access to 60 minutes of physical activity connected to their school day. To support this goal, the Ministry is working with other organizations, and contracted the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association in 2015 to conduct pilot projects in 20 schools to help identify factors that contribute to successfully achieving 60 minutes of physical activity each day. As well, the Ministry continues to visit school boards and schools to monitor how well the Healthy Schools Strategy and policies are being implemented.
- We also noted that one school board we visited during our 2013 audit had introduced a Healthy Schools lead at each of its elementary schools. This person had been trained to provide daily physical activity and was expected to share the information with others in the school. This school board had also hired a Healthy Active Living consultant who held workshops for teachers on daily physical activity.

The status of actions taken on each of our recommendations is described in the following sections.

Healthy Eating

Recommendation 1

To help ensure that offering healthier food choices in schools contributes to improved student eating behaviours and their goals of improving student health and academic achievement, the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and school boards should:

- *develop consistent and effective strategies to monitor compliance with the Ministry's School Food and Beverage Policy, especially ensuring that all items sold in schools comply with the policy's nutrition standards;*

Status: Ministry: In the process of being implemented by June 2017.

School boards: Little or no progress.

Details

Ministry officials visit school boards to see how the Healthy Schools strategy and policies—including, among other things, the School Food and Beverage Policy (Policy) and the daily physical activity policy—are being implemented. Since our 2013 audit report, the Ministry has visited an additional 35 school boards (12 had been visited at the time of our audit in 2013), including select schools at each of these boards, and plans to visit the remaining 25 school boards by the end of the 2016/17 school year. As part of its site visits, the Ministry now asks questions about the extent to which the Policy has been implemented, and whether school boards have processes in place to monitor implementation. Over the past two years, school boards informed the Ministry that they had monitoring processes in place. However, the Ministry did not verify whether these processes actually ensure that schools were complying with the Policy.

School board 1, which required vendors who sold food and beverages in schools to confirm in writing to school principals that they would comply with the Policy, still did not have a process to verify that the vendors were in fact complying. School board 3 had not implemented a process to directly monitor compliance with the Policy, but its Healthy Schools Committee planned to explore options on how to address compliance in the 2015/16 school year. Similarly, School board 2 did not have a process in place to monitor compliance with the Policy, but was expected to begin conducting spot checks (in co-operation with a local public health unit) at secondary schools in the 2015/16 school year to monitor compliance with the Policy, and planned to review all secondary schools by June 2018.

- *capture additional data on the benefits of and challenges to implementing the School Food and Beverage Policy in order to assess the policy's impact and identify areas on which to focus future efforts;*

Status: Ministry: In the process of being implemented by June 2017.

School boards 1 and 3: Little or no progress.

School board 2: In the process of being implemented by June 2016.

Details

The Ministry continues to collect information on the benefits and challenges of implementing the School Food and Beverage Policy (Policy) through site visits to school boards and schools to assess the Policy's impact and identify areas of focus for future efforts. Through these visits, the Ministry has noted some promising practices used by school boards to implement the Policy, including working with public health units to ensure food and beverages sold in schools meet the Policy's requirements and integrating healthy eating into the classroom to promote changes in the food culture of schools. However the Ministry has not assessed whether these practices are effective. As well, the Ministry has noted some challenges to implementing the Policy, including decreases in the profits of secondary school cafeterias, and schools' lack of time to work with food service providers to ensure they fulfill the Policy's requirements. The Ministry expects to have visited all school boards by the end of 2016/17.

The Ministry also introduced the Healthy Eating in Secondary Schools Grants program in 2014, and provided almost \$3.2 million to school boards (23%), secondary schools through school boards (72%), and non-profit organizations (5%) that partnered with school boards or secondary schools on initiatives to increase awareness and access to food and beverages that comply with the Policy's nutrition standards. Initiatives eligible for funding included creating a student nutrition action

committee at schools, and a cafeteria development program to develop quality menu items. The Ministry has contracted an external party to evaluate the projects and provide a final report on the challenges, outcomes, successes, and lessons learned. The final report is expected in June 2016, and the Ministry told us it plans to share the results of the evaluation with school boards and schools.

School board 1 had not made any significant progress on implementing our recommended action but it told us it planned to capture additional data on implementing the Policy through a survey of school administrators in the fall of 2015, which would lead to the development of an action plan by the end of 2015. Similarly, School board 3 had not captured additional data on the benefits and challenges of implementing the Policy since our audit, but said its Healthy Schools Committee planned to explore options for addressing our recommendation during the 2015/16 school year. School board 2 had already started to collect information on implementing the Policy through a survey of principals, teachers and volunteers at its schools. The survey demonstrated a number of challenges, including a lack of volunteers and funds, not enough parental awareness, and insufficient training for volunteers and school staff. This school board also planned to establish focus groups in the 2015/16 school year on the Policy and its implementation.

- *ensure that school administrators and teachers receive sufficient training and supports on how to implement the policy and promote healthy eating concepts in the classroom;*

Status: Ministry: Little or no progress.

School boards: Little or no progress.

Details

In our 2013 audit, we noted that both the Ministry and school boards thought it would be beneficial for teachers to be trained on the requirements of the School Food and Beverage Policy and on integrating healthy eating concepts into classroom

instruction, including subjects that do not cover curricular components on healthy eating.

However, since our audit, the Ministry has not taken any steps to determine if school administrators and teachers received sufficient training and supports to implement the Policy or to integrate and promote healthy eating concepts in the classroom. The Ministry continues to make resources available to teachers and administrators on how to implement the Policy, and in March 2015 it announced it would provide school boards with \$6.4 million for the 2015/16 school year to promote students' wellbeing. School boards could choose to use some of this funding for training purposes.

Since our audit, School board 1 has given new teachers a document that outlines available resources on the Policy and promotes healthy eating concepts. It was also creating training for new school administrators to be provided in the 2015/16 school year. However, with the exception of some health and physical education teachers, at the time of our follow-up the board had not provided training to other teachers on how to promote healthy eating concepts in the classroom and did not have plans to do so. Similarly, at School boards 2 and 3, teachers and school administrators had not been given any training. As of September 2015, School board 2 informed us that it planned to provide training on the Policy every second year to all school administrators, and they will be expected to share the information with staff in their schools. School board 3 advised us that its Healthy Schools Committee plans to further review this recommendation during the 2015/16 school year.

None of the three school boards had assessed whether their teachers and school administrators had sufficient training on how to implement the Policy and promote healthy eating concepts in the classroom. At the time of our follow-up, School board 1 was planning to get feedback from a survey of school administrators in the fall of 2015 and School board 3 was planning to look into how to assess training needs and supports in the 2015/16

school year. School board 2 had no plans to do a formal assessment.

- *develop measurable objectives and related performance indicators for healthy eating activities, and periodically measure progress in achieving these objectives.*

Status: Ministry: Little or no progress.

School boards: Little or no progress.

Details

At the time of our follow-up, the Ministry had not developed any specific measurable objectives and related performance indicators to assess whether offering healthier food choices in schools contributes to improved student eating behaviours, or health and academic achievement.

Similarly, none of the three school boards had developed measurable objectives and related performance indicators for healthy eating activities. They said they would like direction from the Ministry before doing so.

Physical Activity

Recommendation 2

To help safely increase physical activity as well as contribute to reduced sedentary behaviour and improved academic achievement, the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and school boards should:

- *assess options, including practices in other jurisdictions, for providing sufficient physical activity to both elementary and secondary school students;*

Status: Ministry: In the process of being implemented by June 2017.

School boards: Little or no progress.

Details

The Ministry is engaged in several initiatives to increase physical activity among students. For example,

- In 2014, the government committed to a long-term goal of children and youth having

access to 60 minutes of physical activity connected to their school day (at school and in the community). The Ministry, working with other ministries and organizations (including, the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association, and ACTIVE AT SCHOOL), has established pilot programs in 20 schools in 2015 (expected to grow up to 250 in 2016) to identify factors that contribute to achieving 60 minutes of physical activity each day.

- In 2014, the Ministry introduced the Physical Activity in Secondary Schools Grants program, and provided grants totalling almost \$1.3 million to school boards to help increase the number of students participating in physical activity outside instruction time. Activities eligible for funding included: the expansion of current opportunities for physical activity, creating physical activity committees to engage students in interschool or intramural programs, and developing space for students to be more active in and outside of schools. The Ministry has contracted an external party to evaluate the projects and provide a final report to the Ministry on the challenges, outcomes, successes and lessons learned (to be shared with all school boards and schools). The final report is expected in June 2016, and the Ministry plans to use this evaluation to inform its next steps for physical activity programs, policies and initiatives by June 2017.

In addition, the Ministry informed us it was reviewing a recent study by Public Health Ontario on the implementation status of the Ministry's Daily Physical Activity Policy, in order to assess this policy and find ways to increase physical activity for elementary school students. The study found that only about 60% of schools (based on principals' responses) and 50% of classrooms (based on teachers' responses) were meeting the requirements of the Daily Physical Activity Policy.

All three school boards had introduced some initiatives aimed at increasing physical activity,

primarily in elementary schools. Examples include: providing equipment and training for school staff to run games and activities during recess; an initiative that challenges students to participate in 20 minutes of vigorous physical activity each day for 20 weeks; and a program centred on the 2015 Toronto Pan Am and Parapan Am Games that helped children and youth learn about and participate in different sport and recreational activities. However, none of the three school boards had assessed options for providing elementary and secondary school students with enough physical activity, and did not indicate any plans to do so.

- *ensure that elementary school administrators and teachers receive sufficient training on good practices and on how to effectively incorporate daily physical activity into the school day;*

Status: Ministry: Little or no progress.

School boards: Little or no progress.

Details

In our 2013 audit we noted that the Ministry, as well as those we spoke to at all three school boards we visited, thought that all elementary teachers would benefit from training on how to incorporate daily physical activity in the classroom.

However, since the time of our audit, the Ministry has not taken any steps to determine whether elementary school administrators or teachers are knowledgeable about incorporating daily physical activity into the school day. And the Ministry continues to make resources available to teachers and administrators on how to implement daily physical activity into the school day. In the 2015/16 school year, the Ministry is providing school boards with \$6.4 million to promote students' wellbeing, which school boards could use to train teachers and school administrators on daily physical activity, but are not required to.

School board 1 had only provided training on daily physical activity in the classroom to primary school health and physical education teachers, and had no plans to provide such training to other

teachers. This school board also provided new teachers with a document outlining daily physical activity requirements, and was in the process of creating training for new school administrators that it planned to provide in the 2015/16 school year. School board 2 told us it had provided training on daily physical activity to about one-quarter of its elementary teachers, and it expected these teachers to share the information with other teachers at their schools. School board 3 advised us it put in place at each elementary school a Healthy Schools lead, who received training on daily physical activity and was expected to provide the information to others. This board also hired a Healthy Active Living consultant, whose duties include holding daily physical activity workshops in elementary schools. Training is scheduled to continue in the 2015/16 school year.

None of the three boards had assessed whether teachers and school administrators were sufficiently trained on how to effectively incorporate daily physical activity into the school day. At the time of our follow-up, School board 1 was planning to get feedback from a survey of school administrators in the fall of 2015, and School board 3 was planning to look into how to assess training needs and supports in the 2015/16 school year. School board 2 had no plans to do an assessment or otherwise determine if its elementary school teachers and administrators had received sufficient training.

- *familiarize teachers with physical activity safety guidelines;*

Status: Ministry: Little or no progress.

School boards 1 and 3: Little or no progress.

School board 2: In the process of being implemented by June 2016.

Details

In our 2013 audit we noted that none of the elementary teachers we interviewed from the three school boards we visited said they had received training on the physical activity safety guidelines,

yet the majority thought at least some training would be beneficial.

Since our audit, the Ministry has extended its contract with the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association to make the physical activity safety guidelines available on a publicly accessible website. However, the Ministry has not taken any steps to determine whether teachers are more familiar with the safety guidelines now than they were at the time of our audit.

School board 1 informed us that, since our audit, it has provided training on the physical activity safety guidelines to only primary school health and physical education teachers and some teachers with specific responsibilities for school athletics. School board 2 informed us it had provided training on the guidelines only to those teachers involved in school athletics, but expects to provide training to all school staff in the 2015/16 school year. School board 3 advised us it made individuals designated as a Healthy Schools lead at each elementary school aware of the guidelines as well as some teachers and administrators from each school, but had not provided training or otherwise taken action to ensure teachers were familiarized with the guidelines since our audit.

- *set specific goals and targets for increasing physical activity in schools, and periodically monitor, measure and publicly report on the progress made.*

Status: Ministry: Little or no progress.

School board 1: In the process of being implemented by June 2016.

School boards 2 and 3: Little or no progress.

Details

The Ministry of Education informed us that it supports broad government strategies such as Ontario's Healthy Kids Strategy, developed by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, and the Strategic Framework to Help Ontario's Youth Succeed, developed by the Ministry of Children and Youth

Services. We reviewed Ontario's Healthy Kids Strategy and noted that it contains recommendations but no goals and targets. We also reviewed the Strategic Framework and noted that it contains three indicators to determine whether Ontario youth are physically healthy (specifically, the proportion of youth with a healthy weight, the proportion of youth who are physically active, and the proportion of youth who consume at least five servings of fruit or vegetables daily), but no targets were set for these indicators. Furthermore, although the government committed in 2014 to a long-term goal of providing children and youth access to 60 minutes of physical activity connected to their school day (either at school or in the community), it has not set a target date for implementing the goal.

The Ministry's monitoring of its Daily Physical Activity Policy requires improvement. To illustrate, during its scheduled visits to school boards and schools in 2014/15, the Ministry was informed by school boards that most schools were implementing daily physical activity for elementary school students and had a process for monitoring its implementation. However, a recent study by Public Health Ontario on daily physical activity that the Ministry was reviewing at the time of our follow-up, found that about 70% of school principals and teachers surveyed indicated their school did not have monitoring processes to ensure daily physical activity requirements were being met. And, as previously mentioned, the study highlighted that only about 60% of schools (based on principals' responses) and 50% of classrooms (based on teachers' responses) were meeting the Daily Physical Activity Policy's requirements.

School board 1 had not set specific goals and targets for increasing physical activity in schools, but told us that it planned to use data from recent student surveys and surveys of school principals that it would be conducting in the fall of 2015 to set initial goals by the end of the school year. School board 2 said it planned to implement a process to monitor the Ministry's Daily Physical Activity Policy by September 2016, but was waiting for the Ministry to develop goals or targets

for increasing physical activity in schools. School board 3 had no plans to develop any targets for increasing physical activity in schools; however, a survey of its elementary school principals showed that most elementary students participated in daily physical activity, but it was unclear if the activity was sufficient in amount and intensity.

Communication with Parents

Recommendation 3

To help encourage healthier eating and increased physical activity among students, the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and school boards should further explore opportunities to improve communication with parents and assess the effectiveness of such efforts.

Status: Ministry: Little or no progress.

School boards: Little or no progress.

Details

Although the Ministry continues to provide information about healthy eating and physical activity on its website, it has not assessed the effectiveness of its communication efforts with parents.

School boards 1 and 2 informed us that since the time of our audit they had not done anything further to improve communications with parents about the importance of healthier eating and increased physical activity among students. School board 3 said it had increased its communication efforts aimed at parents, through such means as newsletters and social media.

At the time of our follow-up, none of the three school boards had assessed the effectiveness of their communication with parents. However, School board 1 told us it planned to begin assessing its communication efforts in spring 2016 through parent surveys, and School board 2 informed us it planned to meet with its parent committee in the 2015/16 school year to identify more effective ways to communicate with parents about healthier eating and physical activity. School board 3 said it had no plans to assess the effectiveness of its increased communications with parents.

Co-operation with Other Ministries and Organizations

Recommendation 4

The Ministry of Education and school boards should work more effectively with other relevant organizations with similar goals to better integrate and leverage their activities to help encourage healthier eating and physical activity among students.

Status: Ministry: In the process of being implemented.

The Ministry believes the nature of the recommendation is ongoing and therefore has not provided a completion date.

School boards: Little or no progress.

Details

In our 2013 audit we noted that, although the school boards and schools we visited worked with many organizations, the activities of these organizations did not formally factor into the boards' strategies to promote healthier eating or increased physical activity among students. As well, the Ministry and the boards generally did not have information about what these organizations contributed to the development of healthier eating habits by students or the increase in their physical activity.

To help encourage healthier eating and physical activity among students, the Ministry of Education works with other organizations and ministries that have similar goals. For example, as previously mentioned, the Ministry is working toward a goal for children and youth to have access to 60 minutes of

physical activity connected to their school day (at school, and in the community). For this goal, the Ministry is working with the ministries of Health and Long-Term Care; Children and Youth Services; Tourism, Culture and Sport; and Municipal Affairs and Housing. It is also working with organizations such as the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA), ParticipACTION, and ACTIVE AT SCHOOL, to get expert advice on a strategy to move forward on the goal. Also, as previously mentioned, the Ministry of Education has contracted with OPHEA to establish pilot programs in 20 schools in 2015 (expected to grow up to 250 in 2016) and plans to work with its partners in the 2015/16 school year to make any changes needed in the initiative.

All three school boards continue to work with local public health units, local boys' and girls' clubs, and organizations focused on physical activity, such as the Canadian Intramural Recreation Association and the YMCA. However, as at the time of our audit, the boards had only limited information about what these organizations contributed to the development of healthier eating habits by students or the increase in their physical activity. At the time of our follow-up, this has not changed. But School board 2 advised us it planned to review its partnerships with other organizations by June 2016 to assess their impact on students' eating habits and physical activity, while School boards 1 and 3 had no plans to do so.