



INTRODUCTION

Ontario is facing a chronic disease epidemic¹. Chronic disease, characterized by a gradual onset and long-lasting effects, includes diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some forms of cancer². School aged children are at risk of developing both chronic disease and the health behaviours that lead to the development of a chronic disease later in life³.

Children who are at risk of developing chronic disease often experience difficulty achieving in school, and research indicates that living active, healthy lifestyles leads to higher achievement levels in school³. Helping children adopt healthy lifestyle behaviours, including increased levels of physical activity, will result in students who are better equipped for learning in school⁴.

The good news is that many chronic diseases are preventable⁵. This is especially true in children. Chronic diseases are strongly influenced by modifiable risk factors⁶. Modifiable risk factors can be changed to increase or decrease one's risk of developing a chronic disease. Physical activity, nutrition, tobacco, alcohol and substance use/misuse are among the most influential modifiable risk factors⁷. Health promotion strategies are critical in supporting healthy lifestyle behaviours and preventing chronic disease.

Schools play a pivotal role in the adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviours for students. The school environment can help children learn about healthy eating and physical activity, allowing them to make healthy lifestyle choices. Students can also be educated about the dangers of tobacco, alcohol, and substance use/misuse.

It is important to understand the role school environments play in combating chronic disease. Understanding the current state of preparedness can enhance strengths, diminish weaknesses, and identify ways to support schools in preventing chronic disease. Go For Health Windsor-Essex (GFH) conducted a survey in Windsor-Essex County schools about existing policies that support a reduction in chronic disease and improve student health. The four school boards who participated were: Conseil scolaire de district du

Centre-Sud-Ouest (CSDCSO), Conseil scolaire de district des écoles catholiques du Sud-Ouest (CSDECSO), Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) and the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board (WECDSB). This report summarizes the findings of the survey. Information presented will assist decision makers in understanding the impact of chronic disease in developing policies that address the modifiable risk factors.

METHODS & DATA ANALYSIS

The GFH Education Sector Committee developed a survey addressing: physical activity, nutrition, tobacco, alcohol and substance use/misuse in schools. Specific questions were asked regarding the use of strategies, health resources, and community supports.

The questions were administered using an online survey. Principals from all elementary schools, with the exception of the CSDÉCSO board,^{*} were invited to participate in the survey in 2009. An independent consultant analyzed the data. In this summary, valid frequencies are reported for all questions.^{**}

RESULTS

115 out of 133 (87%) school principals, across four school boards submitted survey responses. Overall, school boards responded similarly. No single category (physical activity, nutrition, tobacco, alcohol/substance use/misuse) differed significantly between school boards. Rather, variation was spread evenly throughout the categories.

SURVEY RESPONSE

Across the four school boards, 115 out of 133 (86.5%) school principals responded to the survey.

¹ All numbered references are available online at www.goforhealth.ca/references.

^{*}The CSDÉCSO board chose to survey both elementary and secondary schools in their district. Only data obtained from Windsor-Essex County elementary schools were included in the composite report.

^{**}The ratio of answers is described in proportion to the number who answered any given question.

Policy Support

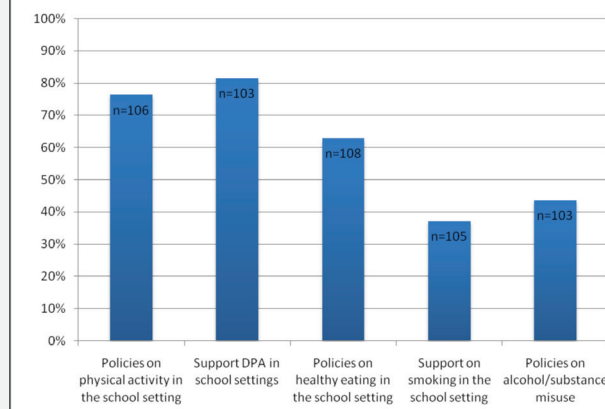


Figure 6. Support for policy development

POLICY SUPPORT

These findings indicate the current status of policy development supporting chronic disease prevention across the four school boards in Windsor and Essex County. While the Ministry of Education has a policy specific to Daily Physical Activity for elementary schools, most principals surveyed felt they would benefit from additional policies on physical activity in the school setting (76.4%) and further support for DPA in school settings (81.6%). Figure 6 shows the response of school principals regarding the benefit of school policies in addressing healthy lifestyle issues in the schools. Following physical activity, policies addressing healthy eating in the school setting were supported by 63.0% of school principals. Overall, 43.7% principals felt their school would benefit from policies related to alcohol and substance and 37.1% felt their school would benefit from additional support related to smoking in the school setting.

School principals were less likely to identify the need for additional policies around tobacco use and alcohol and substance use/misuse. This may be due to clear legislation due to the Smoke Free Ontario Act which includes smoking on school property.

The survey results suggest that school principals value the importance of addressing healthy lifestyle factors that impact on student health and academic performance. However, the survey also showed a need for clear policies around physical activity and healthy eating to ensure consistent practices across all schools in Windsor and Essex County. With the introduction of the Healthy Schools Declaration, students will be well informed about the modifiable risk factors associated with chronic disease and experience the benefits of better health and greater academic achievement.

CONCLUSION

Schools across Windsor and Essex County are in a good position to reach students and address the modifiable risk factors that lead to chronic disease in the future. Results of this survey provided a baseline on current practices in elementary schools related to physical activity, healthy eating, tobacco use, and alcohol and substance use/misuse. While the majority of schools have protocols in place that promote physical activity both during and outside of school hours, one hundred percent compliance with the Ministry of Education's existing DPA policy is lacking. Over 90% of principals were in support of additional teacher resources and workshops to address this issue. In addition, this survey showed that the importance of adequate nutrition and healthy eating is being addressed across schools in varying degrees. However, the majority of principals were in support of policies on healthy eating in the school setting.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Physical activity plays an important part in the prevention of chronic disease. Low levels of physical activity have been strongly associated with obesity, increased risk for diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer⁵⁶. Approximately 16% of school-aged children across Canada do not engage in the recommended level of physical activity⁶. Schools can play an important role in increasing this number by making physical activity part of a student's daily routine.

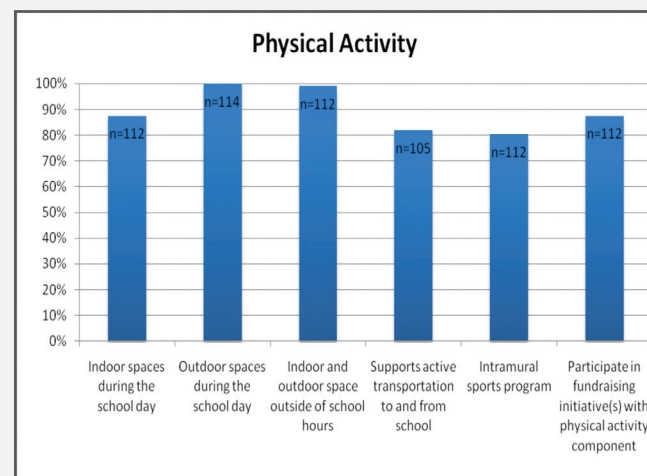


Figure 1. Positive Responses Related to Physical Activity in Schools

Figure 1 shows the survey results regarding the availability of spaces and resources for students to be physically active. All school principals reported having outdoor spaces available for students during school hours, and 87.5% reported the availability of indoor spaces during the same time period. Nearly all principals (99.1%) reported that either indoor or outdoor spaces were available outside of school hours to student groups, community groups, and not for profit or private organizations. These results suggest that there is adequate space available for students to be physically active both in and outside of school, during and after school hours.

The majority of principals (81.9%) reported that active transportation to and from school was supported in their school. Intramural programs and special events offer additional opportunities for students to engage in physical activity. Associating physical activity with fun and positive events is essential when creating lifelong health behaviours⁷. Intramural sports were offered in 80.4% of schools. Fundraising initiatives with a physical activity component were reported by 87.5% of schools.

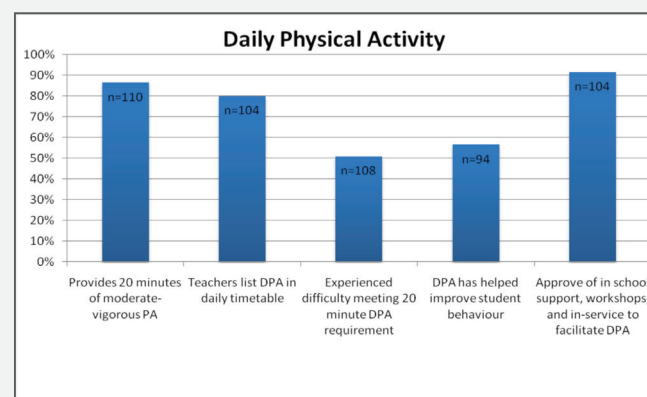


Figure 2. Responses Related to Daily Physical Activity (DPA) in Schools

DAILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Daily Physical Activity (DPA) is a Ministry of Education mandated curriculum component. The survey results indicate that 13.6% of area schools are not providing 20 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on a daily basis. In addition, principals are indicating that 20.2% of teachers are not including DPA in their daily lesson timetable. Based on these findings, DPA may not be implemented as consistently as indicated.

Figure 2 suggests that schools are attempting to include physical activity in their overall programming. One of the reasons, in addition to the Ministry of Education DPA mandates, may be that improvements in student behaviours after participation in DPA are observed by some respondents (56.4%). However, half of school principals (50.9%) indicated difficulty meeting the 20 minutes of DPA requirement and 91.3% of principals said they would approve of additional resources such as workshops or school-based supports to help implement DPA policies.

NUTRITION

Healthy eating, according to Canada's Food Guide, is one of the most effective ways to prevent chronic disease⁸⁹. Education, special programs and events, role modeling and fundraising opportunities are feasible strategies available for schools to promote healthy eating.

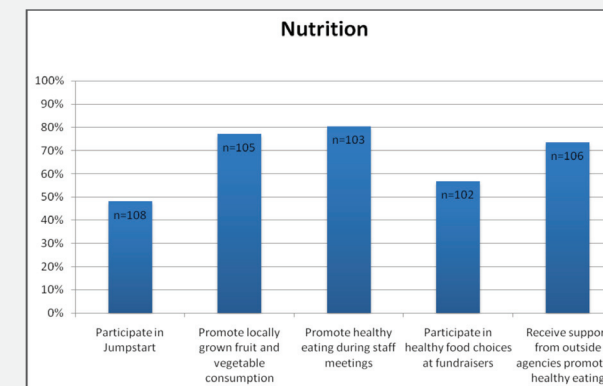


Figure 3. Positive Responses Related to Nutrition Practices in Schools

Figure 3 shows that across all school boards, 77.1% of schools promote the consumption of locally grown fruit and vegetables, 80.6% promote healthy eating during staff meetings and 56.9% choose healthy food choices for fundraisers. Nearly half of school principals (48.1%) reported participation in nutrition programs through the Jumpstart Student Nutrition Program. In addition, 73.6% of schools receive support from outside agencies in promoting healthy eating for students.

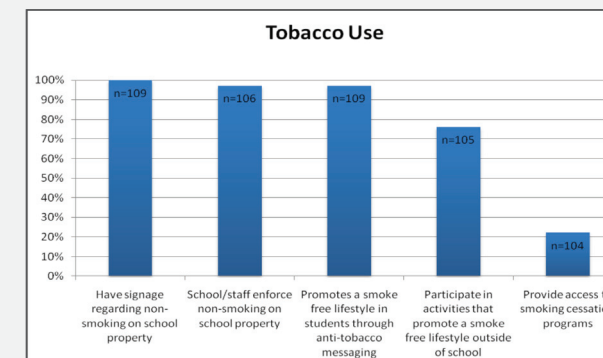


Figure 4. Positive Responses Addressing Tobacco Use in Schools

TOBACCO

The population is increasingly aware of the dangers of tobacco use. While lung cancer is the most common outcome of tobacco use, tobacco is actually associated with several diseases including various cancers and heart disease¹⁰.

Figure 4 indicates that all school principals reported having signage regarding non-smoking on school property. Enforcement by staff of the non-smoking policy on school property was reported by 97.2% of the respondents. This is an indication of compliance with the Smoke Free Ontario Act¹¹.

A smoke free lifestyle for students through anti-tobacco messaging was reported by 97.2% of schools. As well, 76.2% of schools reported participating in activities outside the school setting that promote a smoke free lifestyle such as Hocus Pocus. However, only 22.1% of schools reported utilizing smoking cessation programs. This variance may be a result of the limitations of grade level accessibility to these types of programs.

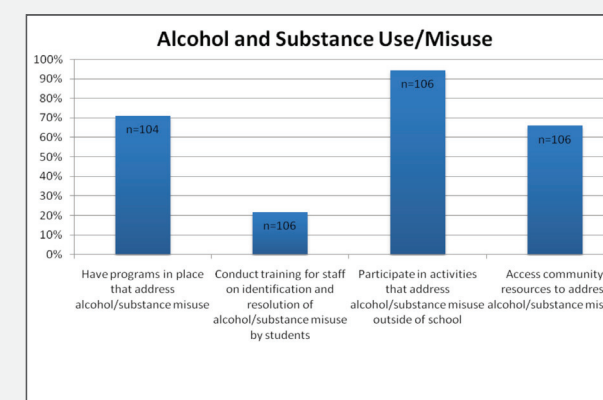


Figure 5. Positive Responses Addressing Alcohol and Substance Use/Misuse

ALCOHOL AND SUBSTANCE USE/MISUSE

While alcohol and substance use/ misuse poses a danger to elementary school students, concerns include not only the use or misuse, but also the witnessing of misuse¹². Figure 5 shows the positive responses in addressing alcohol and substance use/misuse in the schools.

Overall, 71.2% of schools reported having programs in place that address alcohol and substance use/misuse. Elementary school programs vary significantly from secondary programs in that they are primarily a referral-based model to agencies, thus the explanation for only 21.7% of schools reporting training opportunities for staff on the identification and resolution of alcohol and substance misuse.

Schools were much more likely to report participation in programs that address alcohol and substance use/misuse outside of the school setting such as Racing Against Drugs. Approximately two-thirds of schools reported accessing community resources to address these issues.