Promoting a healthy school nutrition environment

Why do we need to be concerned about children and healthy eating?

It is well known that poor diet adversely influences the ability to learn and decreases motivation and attentiveness. Conversely, well-nourished children and adolescents are more likely to be better prepared to learn, be active, and maintain their health as adults. Today, many children and teens have unhealthy eating patterns. Inadequate nutrition can have a detrimental effect on children’s learning ability as well as on their physical growth and development. Furthermore, poor eating habits can lead to unhealthy weights in children and adolescents. Poor eating habits in childhood are also likely to be carried into adulthood and increase the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer and type 2 diabetes.

Why do schools need to support healthy eating?

Next to the family, the school is one of the most influential factors in a child’s development. Schools have a responsibility through the curriculum to teach children about making healthy lifestyle choices, including what to eat to be healthy and to perform to the best of their abilities. Since being well nourished is an essential first step towards students’ readiness to learn, schools must provide them with the skills, social support and environmental reinforcements they need to develop and practice healthy eating behaviour.

Since it is known that healthy eating plays a vital role in cognitive development and thus learning and school performance, it is imperative that school boards adopt a leading role in ensuring that cafeterias provide health food options.

A key consideration is the fact that schools do provide food in many venues and the foods served should model healthy eating to support the health curriculum. For example, foods offered at school meetings, celebrations, special food days, fundraising, lunch programs, vending machines, cafes, stores or tuck shops are all avenues for reinforcing positive messages about nutrition and healthy eating. Even foods that staff and children bring to school can help reinforce healthy eating. Promoting good nutrition at school supports healthy eating at home and visa versa.

A school that promotes and supports healthy eating for students through both words and actions is one that provides a healthy school nutrition environment. The goal is to ensure consistency between the lessons learned from the formal curriculum and the nutrition messages provided by the hidden and parallel curriculum within the school environment. The hidden curriculum includes the school’s
philosophy, nutrition policy and norms, messages and role models within the school environment. The parallel curriculum includes external factors such as the home and community environment. Foods available in the school setting should contribute to students' nutritional well-being and the prevention of disease, be consistent with classroom teaching, reinforce healthy eating messages and be culturally acceptable. Developing a healthy school nutrition environment may seem to be a daunting task but is definitely achievable and worth the effort for the future health of our children.

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What is being done to promote Healthy School Nutrition Environments?
The Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH) developed "Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment". This resource challenges the province, boards of education, school communities and public health units to acknowledge and act on their role in establishing a supportive nutrition environment in schools. To facilitate this OSNPPH School Nutrition Workgroup made nine recommendations which include actions for provincial ministries, local school boards and local boards of health. These recommendations follow.

1. Develop and adopt food and nutrition policies that create and support healthy eating environments in all Ontario schools.
2. Ensure that the formal curriculum is designed to provide adequate learning opportunities for students to develop knowledge, attitudes and skills for adopting healthy eating behaviours; and that teachers devote sufficient time to teaching all of the healthy eating expectations in the curriculum.
3. Encourage and support opportunities for teachers to be trained in nutrition education.
4. Ensure all foods available in the school setting are consistent with classroom teaching, reinforce healthy eating messages and are culturally acceptable.
5. Encourage and support school staff in promoting and modeling healthy eating behaviours while at school.
6. Educate parents and the wider community about nutrition, and involve them in activities that promote the practice of healthy eating.
7. Support the development and sustainability of school nourishment programs, including break, lunch and snack programs.
8. Ensure a safe food environment where all students are comfortable and can enjoy eating.
9. Develop recommendations for scheduling nutrition breaks at appropriate times that allow students sufficient time to eat.

Province-wide support for the Call to Action is increasing. Eight public health units out of 37 in Ontario have officially endorsed the Call to Action, with many other public health unit endorsements in process. (City of Hamilton Health and Community Services Report, October 12th, 2004) Many other health units are working collaboratively with their school boards to develop healthy eating guidelines and resources for their schools (e.g. Halton, Haldimand-Norfolk). These resources are having an impact on helping school administrators, educators, school councils and parents have a better understanding about how to promote a healthy school nutrition environment.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has restricted the sale of junk foods in elementary school vending machines with a policy directive to all Ontario schools. The Ministry of Children and Youth Services has also developed nutrition guidelines for selecting nutritious foods for breakfast, lunches and snacks. A number of Ontario school boards have established official school food policies for schools in their area (e.g. Toronto District School Board, Trillium Lakelands District School Board). These and other similar policies help establish healthy school nutrition environments and provide teachers, students and parents with important, often critical information, strategies and resources to encourage healthy eating at home and in the community.

In Nova Scotia, the Department of Education, working in collaboration with Nova Scotia Health Promotion and other partners developed a comprehensive food and nutrition policy for Nova Scotia Public Schools. This policy outlines the standards for foods and beverages served and sold by the Nova Scotia public schools. In addition it promotes nutrition education in the curriculum, encourages community partnerships, and is supportive of a positive learning environment for students, staff, and the community.

The British Columbia Columbia Healthy Schools Resource Guide outlines the Key Principles that makes healthy school processes work and ultimately help create a positive school nutrition environment.
These principles include the following:
1. Student Voice and Ownership
2. Inclusiveness
3. Empowerment
4. A Process Orientation
5. Partnerships and Participation
6. Holistic Perspective
7. Simple, concrete and fun approach.

The BC Healthy Schools Resource Guide goes further to provide a Five Step process that involves intense student participation and input at every step. The 5 steps are:
1. Create a shared vision of a healthy school.
2. Select the priority health issues
3. Develop an action plan
4. Put the plan into action
5. Evaluate and celebrate.

Four elementary schools located in central British Columbia were involved in creating supportive environments for healthy food choices in their schools. The objectives of the project were: establish a school food policy, students develop at least three food selections and preparation skills, students eat more nutritious food at schools, students develop preferences for healthy foods at school and at home, and school staff have access to different ongoing nutrition supports. Each school approached the development of policies differently. All activities to support attaining the objectives involved components of awareness, education and hands-on student involvement. Activities included increased access to nutritious food at school, bans on selected nutrient-poor choices, healthy food suggestions and guidelines for foods to serve at school functions, nutritious foods used for education and activities, lower price incentives for nutritious foods and nutrition workshops for teachers. The project only lasted four months but an impact was seen as a result of all activities. The project was supported with funding and resources from the Healthy Eating & Active Living (HEAL) project, which contributed to its success. Insufficient student and teacher time, competing priorities and lack of ongoing funding were cited as key challenges for keeping this project going.

The Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA) in consultation with provincial partner associations initiated a Living School project, which is having success promoting healthy school nutrition environments. This province-wide initiative fosters the development of a school environment that promotes and supports healthy eating and active living as part of the school culture. By promoting active, healthy behaviours, it is helping to create healthier lifestyles for young people at these schools. Healthy outcomes include students packing healthier snacks and lunches, increased physical activity both at school and at home, and parental support for a healthy school environment. The Living School Initiative brings together entire communities—students, parents, teachers, administrators, boards of education, public health, sport and recreation organizations, community coalitions, local businesses, and municipal governments— to work together to sup-
port and enhance active, healthy living for children and youth. 

Summary
School staffs do have an important role to play in influencing the foods children choose to eat by living by example and through the foods available at school. Children can only make the right choices if the right foods are available and accessible. By practising healthy behaviours at school, staff can maintain and improve their own health while modelling positive behaviour for their students. Obviously, much support is needed on the home front to help ensure the foods children bring from home is nutritious.

In order to accomplish this, school board administrators need to connect with parents through newsletters and other resources to help them understand and know more about healthy foods. They should find creative ways to educate families about healthy and nutritious foods. They should find creative ways to educate families about healthy and nutritious foods. They should find creative ways to educate families about healthy and nutritious foods. They should find creative ways to educate families about healthy and nutritious foods. They should find creative ways to educate families about healthy and nutritious foods.

Establishing a healthy school nutrition environment is everybody’s business but schools can take charge and lead by example.

Internet Resources Sites:
- Dietitians of Canada - Eat Well. Play Well. 
  www.dietitians.ca/english/frames.html
  www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index_e.html
- Health Canada - Healthy Living.
  www.hc-sc.gc.ca/h1-ve/index_e.html
- Safe Healthy Schools. Communities and Schools Promoting Health.
  www.safehealthyschools.org

References

Toronto District School Board Nutrition Policy see Appendix 1 in the following report: www.tdsb.on.ca/documents/parents/nutrition_programs/docs/03-05-0698%20HealthyFoodsVending.pdf
14. Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA) www.livingschool.ca

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