

Ophea calls on the provincial government to support health and well-being initiatives that foster belonging for Ontario’s children and youth.

January 2024

It’s time to revitalize school health programming!

In this post pandemic context, we have a much clearer understanding of the far-reaching impacts that ongoing school closures and disruptions have had on Ontario’s students.

Despite significant efforts by many, students have lost out on important learning experiences and faced ongoing social isolation, and some—who depend on schools for the safe and stable environment they provide and for the delivery of programs that meet basic needs (such as nutrition programs)—have suffered immeasurably.

These losses and setbacks will have ongoing impacts on an entire generation of Ontario students, compromising their health and well-being. Students experiencing marginalization (due to race, social class, gender identity, and disability) were disproportionately negatively impacted, and they continue to be. The time to act to mitigate the damage is now, and the way forward is by making a significant investment in (and commitment to) inclusive and equitable school health programming, that centers student belonging.

Ontario’s school health context is evolving.

School boards and public health units have seen significant changes in leadership in the last few years and, understandably, the primary focus has been on the management of COVID-19. Unfortunately, this focus has led to gaps in effective approaches to supporting school health and student well-being.

By investing in school health programming now, the government of Ontario can help students to recover and to reach their full potential by gaining the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to succeed.

The Health and Physical Education curriculum was designed to foster student health and well-being, for every single student.

Ontario already has key school health policies that can be prioritized to support children's learning, development, and recovery. First and foremost among these is the [2019 elementary](#) and [2015 secondary](#) Health and Physical Education (H&PE) curriculum.

Instruction through this, and related curricula, provides students with opportunities to develop skills and strategies that will contribute to their ability to make healthy decisions now and into the future. The H&PE curriculum also supports the development of physical and health literacy, mental health, and well-being. These curricula articulate fundamental principles related to centering student voice and student lived experience in implementation. Educators across Ontario need support to understand how to implement them in culturally relevant and responsive ways that prioritize cultures of belonging and minimize harm (particularly for students experiencing marginalization as well-being is essential to learning).

Healthy Schools are the best setting to deliver the curriculum.

Ontario is also a leader in promoting learning environments that support student well-being through [Healthy Schools](#).

Based on both research and experience, we know that school health programs are most effective when they are delivered within [Healthy Schools](#) where students' learning is reinforced through healthy-school policies and healthy practices in their families and communities. Although every student in Ontario has a right to attend a Healthy School, not everyone does. Ophea can support changing this, even in the most vulnerable and high needs school communities across the province.

In working together, we are stronger and more effective.

Across Ontario, school boards and public health units have varied capacities to support effective implementation of school health programs. However, the ability to quickly ramp up effective school health programming can be accelerated by prioritizing shared support between Ontario's 72 school boards, 34 public health units, and 13 faculties of education.

Individual schools will also need tailored support. Currently less than half of Ontario's elementary schools have a Health and Physical Education (H&PE) specialist teacher. Instead, instruction of H&PE at the elementary level is often delivered by teachers who teach up to 10 subjects.

These educators do not always feel comfortable addressing all areas of the H&PE curriculum in a culturally relevant and responsive way; including topics like healthy eating, substance use, mental health, and physical education. They require high-quality curriculum-aligned resources and professional learning.

Ophea is prepared to lead the way in revitalizing school health programming.

Ophea's work in supporting educators builds off our extensive history of implementing effective school health programs provincially and nationally.

Based on our existing relationships with school boards, public health units, faculties of education, and provincial partners, the approaches outlined in this document are realistic and achievable.

The following outcomes will be achieved:

Students will gain:

- an increased understanding of the factors that contribute to healthy development and a sense of personal responsibility for life-long physical and mental health;
- an understanding of how healthy active living is connected with the world around them and with the health of others;
- the skills needed to foster overall health and well-being; positive mental health; and the ability to learn, build resilience, and thrive.

Schools will gain:

- increased opportunities for localized solutions to health and well-being challenges;
- increased delivery of physical activity and sport opportunities across the school day, that reflects student identities, needs, and interests;
- supports needed for staff to foster positive well-being;
- the ability to enhance the school as a safe and welcoming environment that fosters student success.

School Boards/Public Health Units will gain:

- greater alignment between school and community health approaches;
- an improved ability to achieve multiple education policy directives and align themselves with public health guidance;
- increased coordination of school board and public health resources to better support areas of local need in schools.

The province will gain:

- the ability to position Ontario as a leader in health and well-being in schools;
- a generation of students with increased mental well-being and resiliency;
- a reduced risk of chronic illness and negative mental health outcomes for children and youth, and a reduction in the burden on the provincial health care system.

We're calling on the provincial government to pledge their support for Ontario's children and youth by making a **\$20M investment to revitalize school health programming.**

Over the next four years, this investment of **\$20M** will support quality implementation of curriculum content focused on health and physical literacy, delivered within a Healthy School environment, centering and prioritizing student belonging.

The investment will break down as follows:

Update classroom supports for Health and Physical Education and related healthy active living curriculum: **A one-time investment of \$4M**

It's important that classrooms across the province are identity-affirming, and that teaching supports reflect the changing needs of students and educators. Updating these supports will mean engaging key health promotion and equity-deserving partners to collaborate on identifying and providing the tools educators need to deliver the H&PE curriculum in all Ontario school boards in order to help students recalibrate their well-being.

Provide professional learning on culturally relevant and responsive implementation of the Health and Physical Education curriculum: **\$1M annually over four years, for a total of \$4M**

Educators and school board leaders have gone above and beyond the call of duty throughout the pandemic. By providing them with easily accessible professional learning

modules, we can lighten their loads by facilitating their ongoing professional development, helping them to more effectively meet changing student and community needs. Newly developed learning modules focusing on culturally relevant and responsive pedagogical approaches to health and active living implementation will be rolled out through a provincial coaching model within school boards.

Develop and deliver a provincial comprehensive school health approach: \$3M annually over four years, for a total of \$12M

This will see us enhancing a made-in-Ontario Healthy Schools approach and making it available to all school boards. Through the program, Regional Facilitators will support school boards, public health, and municipalities in collaborating and planning. Supports between schools and public health units that have a mandate to work with schools will also be enhanced.

School environments impact student health!

By investing strategically in revitalizing school health programming, the government of Ontario will be positioning itself as a leader in student health and well-being, shifting the narrative and centering the experiences of students who need it the most. This is what parents, caregivers, and families across the province need.

Perhaps most importantly, however, this investment today will pay dividends in the future by ensuring that students gain the knowledge and skills they need to develop their mental health and well-being and thrive in an ever-changing world.