



2024—2025

Impact Report



Our Strategy in Motion:  
Illuminating the Brightspots



# So Every Student Can Thrive

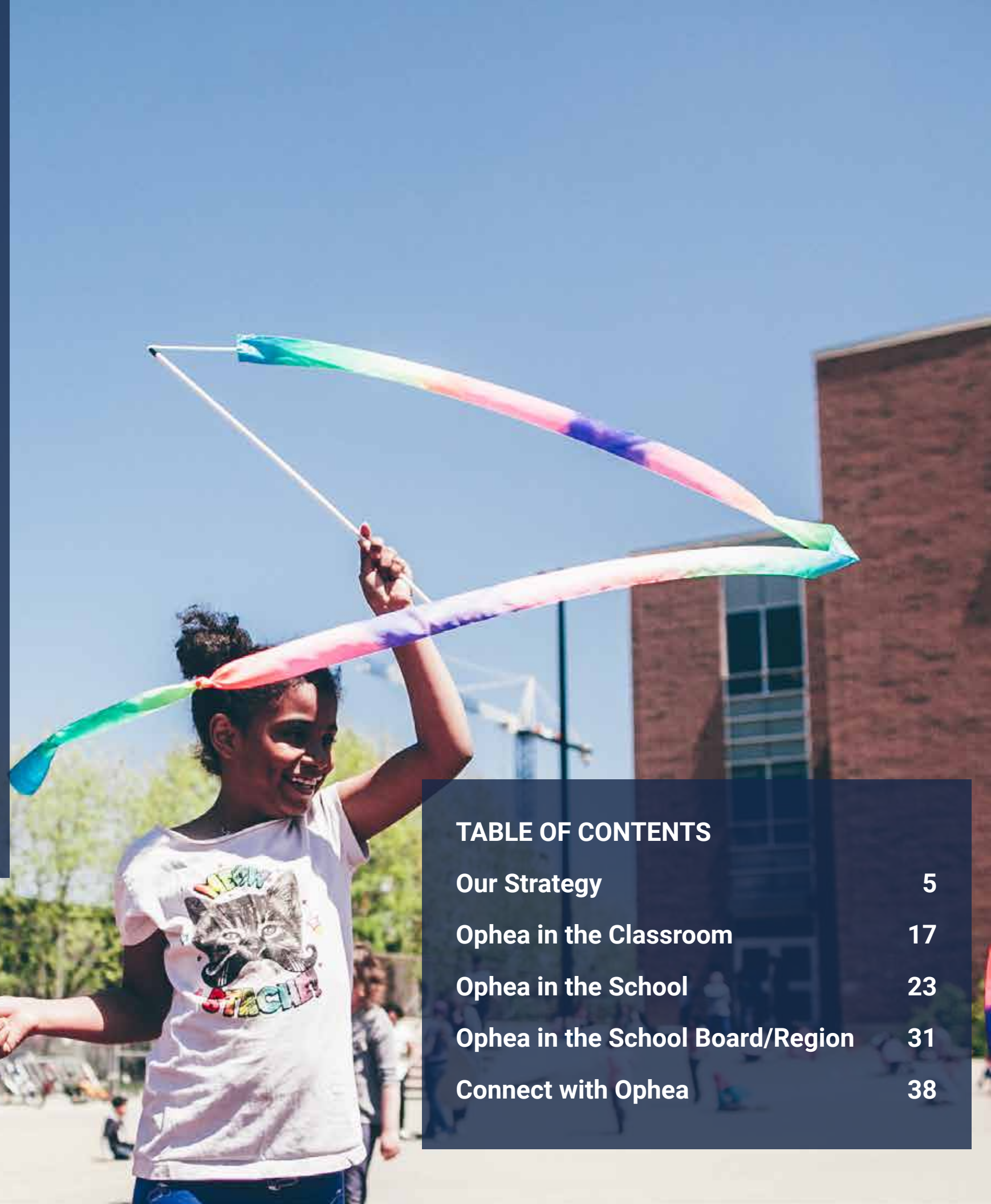


Quality Health and Physical Education is good for students, and boasts a whole host of social, emotional and physiological benefits that set the tone for a lifetime of health and well-being. Health and Physical Education programs are most effective when they are delivered in healthy schools and when students' learning is supported by school staff, families and communities. Every student has a right to quality Health and Physical Education, where they feel they belong.

The trouble is, not every student experiences this.

An education system that works for those experiencing marginalization tends to work better for every student.

We are working towards a future where every student feels like they belong and their health and well-being matters.



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# Our Strategy

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# Our Vision

Our vision is that children and youth value and enjoy the benefits of healthy, active living. Since 1921, we have worked in partnership with school boards, public health, government, non-government organizations and other committed partners to develop groundbreaking programs and services.





# Our Values

- Authentic, inclusive spaces
- Curiosity, bravery and humility
- Prioritizing each others' well-being

# Our Beliefs

- Belonging is essential to well-being; well-being is essential to learning
- Equity-centred approaches increase opportunities to achieve greater well-being
- Working across the entire education system is critical to enabling the conditions for every teacher and student to thrive







# Our Imperatives

- Know our audience
- Centre the margins
- Illuminate the bright spots
- Practice inclusion first

# Our Practices

- Learning from and collaborating with equity-centred groups
- Using equity-centred frameworks
- Equipping educators with culturally relevant and responsive classroom supports
- Amplifying and learning from voices at the margins







# Theory of Change

To have the greatest impact on the well-being of children and youth, we focus our work:

## In Classrooms

We provide quality Health and Physical Education curriculum supports for teachers, so that they:

- value the unique experiences students bring to their learning;
- have increased confidence and capacity to cultivate inclusive Health and Physical Education classes where all students feel they belong.

## In Schools

We support and recognize healthy and inclusive school communities, so that principals and school leaders:

- value and prioritize conditions that enable inclusive healthy schools;
- value and prioritize safe and inclusive physical activity opportunities that promote belonging.

## In School Boards and Regions

We facilitate, advocate and connect with key/system leaders, so that regional and provincial leaders:

- value and enable equity and human rights as they intersect with well-being at a school board/regional level;
- promote equitable and inclusive curriculum supports that promote belonging.

...leading to a future where every student can value and enjoy the benefits of healthy, active living.





# Ophea: A trusted partner in education and health

Ophea occupies a unique and impactful position within the education sector in Ontario (and beyond).

Ophea collaborates with a wide range of subject matter experts, historically and currently underserved communities and cross-sector partners to ensure that everything we offer—resources, professional learning, programs and services—is evidence-informed, equity-driven and responsive to the emerging needs of the education sector.

100+

years supporting health and well-being education in Ontario schools

Fully bilingual support in

English  
and  
French

Long-standing working relationships with all

12

school boards,

29

public health units,  
and

15

faculties of education

Multiple levels of impact including: classrooms, schools and school boards/regions

Management of Ontario Physical Activity Safety Standards in Education powered by Ophea and a team of

35

professionals with experience and expertise in education, physical activity and risk management.

Network of

18

Ophea Ambassadors available to provide customized support across the province

100%

reach to all 5,000 schools across Ontario





Ophea in the Classroom

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## CRRP means getting to know your learners, day by day

Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP) is a flexible framework for building positive environments and improving student success. But perhaps most importantly in Health and Physical Education (H&PE), it asks educators to challenge their assumptions about their students by getting to know them on day one, then continuing to stay tuned-in to their changing needs related to movement, health and well-being. If an educator is just getting started, [Ophea's Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy in Health and Physical Education](#) resource can help.

Belinda Cox, an Ophea Ambassador and Physical Education Lead at Centre Wellington District High School in Fergus, Ontario, in the Upper Grand District School Board suggests that educators start the year off with a get-to-know-you activity or survey to gather information about their specific learners. "This early engagement is crucial because we only get one first impression, and we want to avoid unknowingly causing harm or creating uncomfortable situations for any student."

From there, keep in mind that learners' needs will differ and shift from day to day. In her senior Personal Fitness classes, Cox checks in by having students journal once a week. She has them reflect on the five factors of health she teaches: how they eat, how they sleep, how they move, who they interact with and what's going on in their brain. She asks them to consider which areas they've paid the most attention to that week, which they might have neglected and how they can make positive changes.

"One: I'm teaching a reflective mindset for students to pause and check in with themselves. And two: it's an ongoing dialogue between myself and students individually. I'm learning what's going on in their lives, and that might inform how I approach the student when I see them the next day."

The bottom line, according to Cox: "When we're talking about Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy, we constantly need to ask ourselves: to whom are we being relevant and how are we being responsive to their needs?" We can only find the answers—and ensure every student feels they belong in H&PE—by getting to know the individual learners right in front of us.

*"When we're talking about Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy, we constantly need to ask ourselves: to whom are we being relevant and how are we being responsive to their needs?"*

— Belinda Cox, Ophea Ambassador and Physical Education Lead





## Disability-centred Inclusion Takes a Mindset

When Laura Seckington leads training in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), she starts by telling participants that it's not a goal that can be achieved—it's more of a mindset to be adopted. "We're not going to arrive at UDL today," says the Assistive Technology Consultant and Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) in the York Region District School Board. "You're not going to go in tomorrow and have everything set up a hundred percent for every student." Typically, she feels a huge sigh of relief go through the room.

That relief grows even stronger when she reminds educators that providing inclusive learning spaces and opportunities isn't just up to them. Seckington supported the writing of Ophea's free [Disability-Centred Movement: Supporting Inclusive Physical Education](#) resource. "Our goal was to intentionally write it so that everyone—whether teacher, support staff, administrator, caregiver or recreational provider—could see themselves in the resource."

Far from being a cookie cutter framework, the disability-centered movement strategies in the resource have a focus on flexibility, allowing them to stretch not only to meet the needs of different learners, but of those same learners on different days. "Even when we provide all the necessary entry and access points to a program, what's changing is our students," says Seckington. "What works beautifully one day might need some tweaking the next time you teach it."

It also helps to remember that small changes can have big impacts. Seckington recalls working with one teacher in particular who supported a student on the autism spectrum who communicated non-verbally. The gym environment, with its loud and echoing noises, was overwhelming for the student, who was initially only able to remain there for a few minutes at a time.

Seckington pointed them to Ophea's resource—not only for the engaging activities she knew the student would eventually enjoy, but for the section on [Students with Communication Disabilities](#) in the front matter. "The teacher was able to implement some simple strategies, like using visual supports and having a designated space for communication within the gym," recalls Seckington. "It ended up being a huge turning point in the student's ability to participate in H&PE [Health and Physical Education] in a shared space with their peers, not just that school year, but I believe in future years as well."

"Even when we provide all the necessary entry and access points to a program, what's changing is our students. What works beautifully one day might need some tweaking the next time you teach it."

— Laura Seckington, Assistive Technology Consultant and Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT), York Region District School Board





Ophea in the School

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# A Partnership That Acts Like a Bridge

At Nbisiing Secondary—a First-Nation-governed school just outside North Bay on the shores of Lake Nipissing—teaching the Ontario Secondary Curriculum occurs through activities such as harvesting medicines, hunting animals, or ice fishing. Student learning often takes the shape of a blend of experiences and stories rooted in heritage and culture, merging tradition and expectation.

experiential learning opportunities, where safety requirements are often presented as a checklist of warnings at the outset of an activity.



“We have a saying that you’ll hear a teaching 100 times and learn something new every time,” explains Daniel Stevens, Director of Education for Nipissing First Nation and Ophea Board Director. “Our methodology and pedagogy is based on this repetitive approach to teaching. The mastery of skill is foundational, and with mastery comes safety. It’s inherent to the process.”

This is a significantly different approach to safety than what we typically see in Western physical or outdoor education programs or

Both approaches can improve student safety, but complications can arise for Nbisiing Secondary when—despite all efforts to impart safe practices—someone gets hurt. This is why Ophea and Nbisiing Secondary worked together to re-vision what the [Ontario Physical Activity Safety Standards in Education](#) (Safety Standards) could look like in this Nation. “The first thing we get asked is, ‘Did you follow the Safety Standards?’” says Stevens. “What we do doesn’t fit into the Safety Standards, because there are no checklists to safety as its integrated in the standards of practice for what we do. We needed to tell our story to people who could listen with the openness to understand, so it was a natural link to call Ophea in and say, ‘Hey, how can we work together?’”



Over the last year, Ophea and Nbisiing Secondary have worked to co-create a set of safety standards specifically geared toward the traditional activities of Nipissing First Nation—with both groups learning and

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— Daniel Stevens, Director of Education for Nipissing First Nation and Ophea Board Director



benefitting along the way.

“Taking our stories and our approach and putting them into this model allows us—should we end up in a situation where there’s a question from outside agencies as to whether or not safety was adhered to—to turn to page three and say, ‘Oh yeah, we cover these safety procedures through this teaching.’” They can then protect themselves by easily demonstrating how standards were followed in a court setting, or to a concerned parent or community member who may not carry the knowledge of traditional teachings.

Furthermore, in Ophea, Nbisiing Secondary has found a partner who can advocate for them at the Ministry level, with private interest holders, with partners in education and with insurance companies. “These are all very important for us,” says Stevens, “because we live in a litigious world.”

Ophea, meanwhile, has gained an understanding of new teachings and approaches that can be more inclusive not just for Indigenous people, but for every Ontario student.

According to Stevens, the partnership acts like a bridge. “Now our stories, our teachings, our processes, can go to Ophea.” Likewise, Ophea’s expertise in managing risk in a larger Ontario context can guide Nbisiing in framing their practices for legal purposes. “We’re using our skill sets to the highest levels of effectiveness and efficiency on both ends, and ultimately making everybody safer,” he says.







# Ophea Learning Labs: A Different Kind of Professional Learning

Sayedata Dato, Principal of H.G. Bernard Public School in York Region just placed a large order for scarves, pool noodles and hula hoops. Sayeda and her team have been participating in an Ophea Learning Lab—and they’ve got big plans to make small but meaningful changes.

An Ophea Learning Lab is a facilitated school-wide approach to professional learning that starts where a school is and guides them to where they want to go. “Sometimes when you go to professional development, you disengage, because you know it already, or it doesn’t apply to you,” says Dato. “The Learning Lab wasn’t ‘sit and get.’ It was experiential. It was live, fluid, meaningful. It met a need not just of the school but of the teachers as well.”

At H.G. Bernard, the process started with putting together a team including primary, junior and intermediate teachers, as well as a French teacher and Special Education teacher. After reaching out to each team member, Ophea set up a shared document to highlight their areas for growth. Ophea also used this information to create a learning objective for an in-person visit to the school. “All five teachers were fully engaged because they had input into what they wanted Ophea to help them with,” Dato points out.

Every school that participates in a Learning Lab will identify unique challenges and come away with custom solutions, but one thing they’ll have in common is a focus on sustainability.

Dato’s team identified that a school-wide focus on sports meant some students were being left behind. “What I learned with Ophea is that you can have engaging PE [Physical Education] classes with just a few materials and build on students’ endurance, mobility, and flexibility,” she reflects. “All of the curriculum expectations can be met. In fact, they more-so can be met in these collaborative types of activities, versus volleyball and basketball where students who aren’t athletic in nature are disengaged.”

Next up, they’re working on a flexible school-wide approach to Daily Physical Activity (DPA) that will see student leaders take charge of activities in some classrooms, while in others (where teachers prefer to do DPA on their own time) the activities will be accessed through a Google Classroom.

Dato plans to check in with staff next year to see how the approach is working, and how it might be adjusted. “The sparks have been ignited!” she says. “I see sustainability. The foundation has been laid. We know what the potential is. Now we need to continue to have those conversations.”

“Sometimes when you go to professional development, you disengage, because you know it already, or it doesn’t apply to you. The Learning Lab wasn’t ‘sit and get.’ It was experiential. It was live, fluid, meaningful. It met a need not just of the school but of the teachers as well.”

— Sayeda Dato, Principal of H.G. Bernard Public School, York Region





# Ophea in the School Board/ Region

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## Gender Diversity and Expression Learning Sessions for System-leaders

Around the time Bill C-16 was passed, Dr. Lee Airton began their work as Associate Professor in Gender and Sexuality Studies in Education at Queens University. The bill, an amendment to the Canadian Human Rights Act, made it illegal to discriminate against someone based on their gender identity or expression.

Right away, Airton became interested in how this would be reflected in school board policy. “We were immediately seeing and hearing about a common misconception that only transgender people would be protected by these rights,” says Airton. “In truth, the project of creating space for gender diversity in Ontario schools is for everyone, because gender is something everyone experiences.”

In 2021, Ophea reached out to Airton about some work the organization was doing around gender identity, gender expression and human rights in education. Working together was a natural fit. And four years later the partnership is still going strong.

Most recently, Airton worked with Ophea on three series of online learning and sharing sessions for Ontario School Board leaders around the topic of gender identity and expression. The sessions have been a career highlight for Airton. “I’m always researching, writing about and studying how policy is working in this area,” says Airton. “But in these sessions—the real-time benefits of that research were being shared with decision makers in school boards.”

In addition to providing an avenue for Airton to share their group’s research findings, the sessions gave board leaders a space of peers where they could feel safe being learners and asking genuine questions. “My experience in working with leadership around gender diversity issues is that they’re people, and they have questions; similar kinds of questions and similar gaps in their understanding as literally everyone who works for them,” says Airton. “But not knowing things, wondering things, being unsure about what to do... that’s not a common expression they can have in their work.”

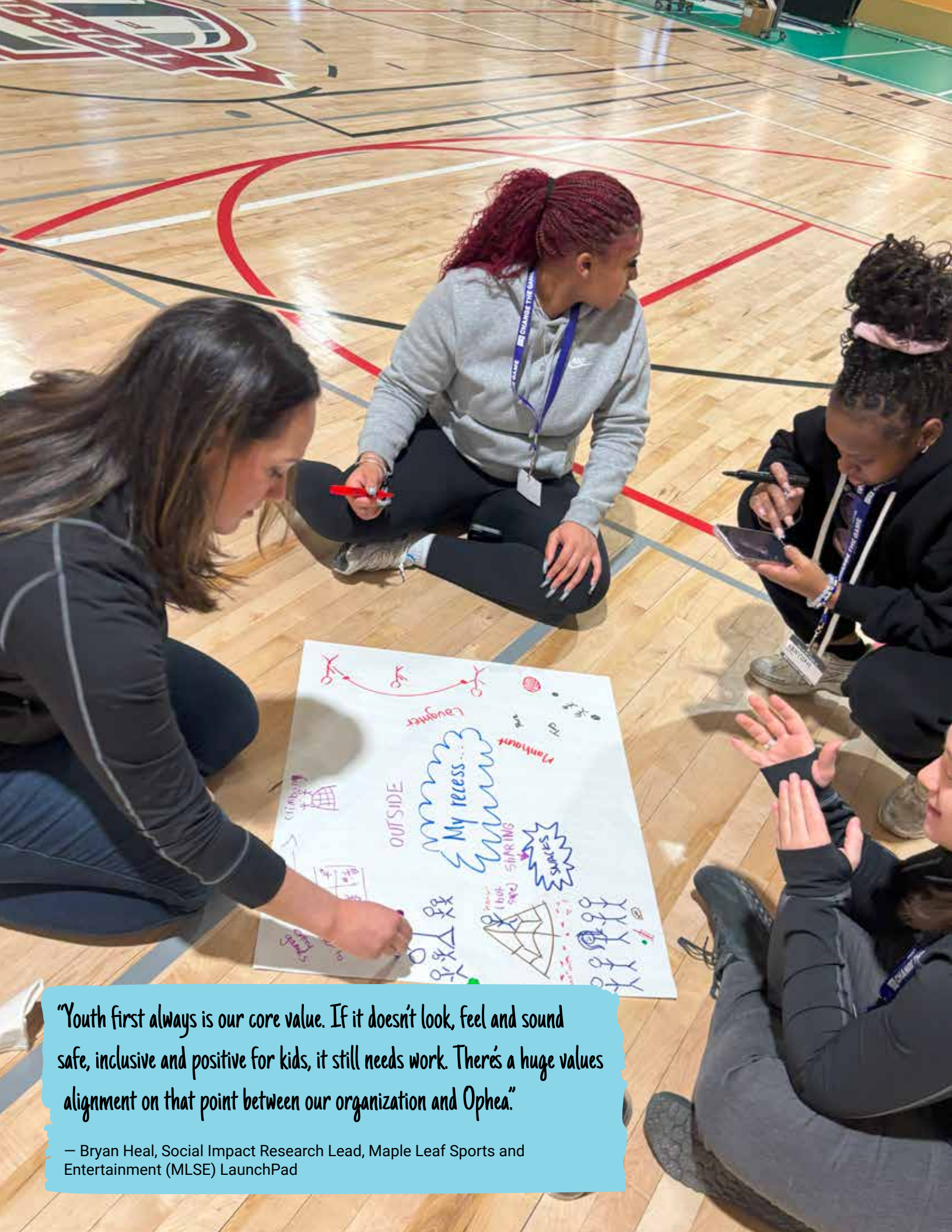
Acting as a connection between academics like Airton, who have policy research to share, and board leaders who have questions about how best to put policy into practice, is a powerful way Ophea makes change in Ontario schools, and it’s just one reason why Airton looks forward to many more collaborations.

“I love the people who work at Ophea,” says Airton. “They’re extremely warm. They’re personable. They know their stuff. And they know everybody. The organization has the ability to take an idea and make it into something that has tremendous impact for boards and educators.”

*“In truth, the project of creating space for gender diversity in Ontario schools is for everyone, because gender is something everyone experiences.”*

— Dr. Lee Airton, Associate Professor in Gender and Sexuality Studies in Education, Queens University





# A Community-wide Way to Reimagine School Sport

On March 1, 2024, [MLSE LaunchPad](#) and Ophea brought together youth, community leaders and system-level decision makers for a session on reimagining school sport—and it was just the beginning.

“Youth first always is our core value,” explains Bryan Heal, Social Impact Research Lead for Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment (MLSE) LaunchPad. “If it doesn’t look, feel and sound safe, inclusive and positive for kids, it still needs work. There’s a huge values alignment on that point between our organization and Ophea.”

Sport can be a powerful way to build community but, all too often, there are barriers to participation. These include programming that fails to acknowledge (and sometimes outright denies) student’s identities, cost-related obstacles and a lack of culturally appropriate opportunities. To make matters worse, when the bulk of Health and Physical Education (H&PE) programming is sports-focused, it only meets the needs of a small group of students, while others are discouraged from participating. This perpetuates harmful assumptions about who physical activity is for.

At the 2024 reimagining school sports session, which followed several years of pandemic-related disruptions in school and extra-curricular programming, one key takeaway was a real desire from students for intentionality around social connection, belonging and developing life skills through sport, play and movement programs. Another central insight was that there’s a vast amount of untapped potential in community partnerships.

“So many organizations we talk to want to work with schools more,” says Heal, “but they don’t necessarily know how. They have questions around how to engage students and work with teachers and administrators.” Likewise, thinking about physical activity through a lens of inclusion and belonging can be challenging for community organizations who are used to taking a more traditional approach to sport.

“What was so impressive for me about that first session was that the room was able to get beyond identifying the problem and think about solutions,” says Heal. “Second, participants were honest about where the fault lines are, and that led to interesting insights about what needs to happen when it comes to greater collaboration between school and community sport providers and interest holders.”

There are no quick fixes when it comes to honouring student voice and working to align schools and community groups to deliver programming; but Heal sees great progress happening. “It’s like they say: you have to load the bases before you can hit a grand slam,” he muses. A little over a year after that first session, Ophea and MLSE LaunchPad hosted a follow-up for a similar group of participants. “You could see the psychology changing,” says Heal. “The discussions had gotten a little bit more logistical and practical.”

But perhaps most importantly, every interest holder in the room seemed to share a common goal: putting students first and increasing access to physical activity opportunities that centre joy, connection and belonging.

“Youth first always is our core value. If it doesn’t look, feel and sound safe, inclusive and positive for kids, it still needs work. There’s a huge values alignment on that point between our organization and Ophea.”

— Bryan Heal, Social Impact Research Lead, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment (MLSE) LaunchPad



# Supporting the National Indigenous Sport Strategy

When the Aboriginal Sport Circle (ASC)—Canada’s national voice for Aboriginal sport, physical activity and recreation—set out to create a National Indigenous Sport Strategy, they knew they had a gap in understanding to fill.

“Education has always been acknowledged as a fundamental part of the spaces where First Nations, Métis, Inuit children and youth are, so we need to be able to shape that space,” says Janice Forsyth, Vice President of the ASC.

The ASC engaged Ophea to facilitate a strategy needs assessment to help them better understand the national school context for Aboriginal children and youth. “Ophea has a well-deserved reputation for being able to move the dial in this area,” says Forsyth. “They do really well-thought-out, well-conceived, well-written and researched reports that can inform policy direction.”

In addition to identifying priority areas for action, the National Strategy brought together key players from across Canada and helped to start important conversations about how they can work together—something Forsyth believes will help to bridge the silos that often exist in sport, recreation and education, and bring more coordination to ensure the right people are working together for the benefit of Indigenous youth.

Some of the key recommendations for the education sector arrived at through the needs assessment include: shifting the education system to better understand and incorporate Indigenous practices; working with partner organizations (especially those in the publicly funded system) to challenge and disrupt the labelling and harms Indigenous students experience; funding local coaching and mentorship programs in on-reserve schools; shining the spotlight on Indigenous youth in sport; and investing in Indigenous land-based education.

Now that the larger National Strategy is complete, it will be shared widely, first with the ASC’s funder, Sport Canada, then with their membership and the public. The ASC leadership will also meet the at the Canada Games in Newfoundland in August. “There, we’ll be presenting the National Strategy to the Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers for Sport, Physical Activity, and Recreation” says Forsyth. From there, it will be on to the implementation phase.

It’s exciting and impactful work that Ophea is proud to have been part of. “I think the ASC’s work with Ophea will help to more fully address the issues we’re all trying to work on here, whether you’re Indigenous or not,” says Forsyth “—how to create a healthier space for Indigenous people through sport, physical activity and recreation.”



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— Janice Forsyth, Vice President of the Aboriginal Sport Circle and Ophea Board Director



# Connect with Opheia

Together, we can make every school a place where students feel like they belong.

**Subscribe** to our e-newsletter to stay informed on the latest developments and to learn how Opheia is making a difference: [ophea.net/econnection](http://ophea.net/econnection)

**Join** our network of volunteers and help drive real change: [ophea.net/donate/volunteer-your-time-ophea](http://ophea.net/donate/volunteer-your-time-ophea)

**Donate** now to help us advance this important work: [ophea.net](http://ophea.net)

**Partner** with us to expand our impact: [ophea.net/contact-us](http://ophea.net/contact-us)

