

Making Ontario Schools Healthier Places to Learn

***Education Minister
Gerard Kennedy***

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RATIONALE FOR HEALTHIER SCHOOLS

A candy bar or an apple? The choice is simple when you are a seven-year-old. Kids, like most of us, would rather have something sweet. The trouble is most kids haven't yet learned moderation and balanced eating habits as part of a healthy lifestyle. When children are exposed to less healthy choices at school, they do not compensate by choosing more healthy choices when away from school. Our schools need to help children learn how to make the best nutritional choices and form good eating habits now to carry them through their lives.

Inadequate nutrition can have a detrimental effect on children's learning ability, motivation and attentiveness as well as on their physical growth and development. Poor eating habits are also contributing to the rising rate of childhood and adolescent obesity and type-2 diabetes. The habits formed at these young ages are carried into adulthood and are increasing the risk of chronic diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, asthma and orthopaedic injuries.

Canada's health care system pays the cost. It was estimated that in 1997, between \$1-\$3 billion was spent treating ailments related to obesity.

"There is strong evidence that the prevalence of overweight and obesity in Canadian children has escalated dramatically over the last two decades."

- Canadian Medical Association Journal, 2000

The Dietitians of Canada have provided the Ministry of Education with nutritional recommendations to support a comprehensive approach to healthy eating for children in schools, including specific guidance for food choices available from vending machines in elementary schools.

LEAVING IT UP TO CHILDREN?

When children decide what to eat, the first consideration is taste. Foods with high sugar and fat content taste good and appeal to the palette before healthier choices like fruit. When low-nutrient foods are provided along side of those with more health-promoting properties, children are challenged to make the best choice for their health.

Children are left to make these decisions daily in our schools, and taste continues to rule. Approximately 27 per cent of boys and 23 per cent of girls in Grades 6 to 8 consume candy and chocolate bars daily.

In addition to the "empty calories" that these foods contain, their consumption leads to lowered intakes of energy from the food groups recommended by Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating. For instance, children who drink soft drinks consistently drink less

milk and fruit juices, leaving 50 per cent of them without the needed calcium for bone growth and development.

EATING WELL, LEARNING WELL

The link between diet and the ability to learn has also been clearly understood by health and education professionals for some time. Nutrient deficiencies, for instance anaemia, adversely affect performance on intelligence tests, ability to complete learning tasks and create delays in academic achievement.

Conversely, the Dietitians of Canada found that when interventions such as breakfast programs are introduced, there are demonstrated improvements in school performance, attendance rates and tardiness among the participants.

“Well-nourished children and adolescents are more likely to be better prepared to learn, be active, and maintain their health as adults.”
- Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health

DIETITIANS OF CANADA PROPOSAL A LEAD TO FOLLOW

In an attempt to begin to end and even reverse these negative trends, the Dietitians of Canada have released their paper entitled “School Food and Nutrition Recommendations for the Ontario Ministry of Education, re: snacks and beverages dispensed by vending machines.” This paper has become the basis for collaboration with the Ministry of Education in a bid to affect positive nutrition changes and choices for Ontario’s students, and will serve as nutritional guidelines for school boards across the province.

The emphasis in the paper is not about narrowing choices or limiting access in a prohibitive way. The findings encourage food patterns that are varied, nutrient-dense and provide increased energy intake appropriate for growth and development.

WHAT TO LEAVE IN, WHAT TO TAKE OUT OF OUR SCHOOL VENDING MACHINES

The key finding by the Dietitians of Canada is that children are not consuming nutritionally balanced or adequate diets. A low median for intake of most of the food groups is apparent across both genders and in all age levels. For example, of children aged six to 12, only 20 per cent are receiving the recommended daily amounts of fruits and vegetables.

Schools are in a position now to provide knowledge and reinforce healthy eating behaviours. When re-stocking our schools’ vending machines, we have the opportunity to influence nutritional choices for Ontario students.

The Dietitians of Canada reviewed the beverage and snack food content of elementary school vending machines. In the category of beverages, the review found that past choices that were offered to our children in school vending machines included soft drinks, fruit drinks and sports drinks. All three of these included added sugars and, in the case of some soft drinks, caffeine.

Current beverage trends show that children favour soft drinks over milk.

Canadian studies indicate that:

- ***Approximately one-third of Ontario students in Grade 4-8 consume soft drinks daily***
- ***Children who consume soft drinks average one less serving of milk each day***
- ***The consumption of milk is almost 30 per cent lower in schools that also sell soft drinks***
- ***By the time children reach the “tween” years (9 to 12), many have lifestyle habits that could contribute to them developing cardiovascular disease as early as their 30s***

The Dietitians of Canada recommend that the above selections be replaced with fruit juices (when the content is 100 per cent fruit juice), lower-fat and non-fat milk and bottled water.

In the food category, the greatest concern is the fat content of most snack foods and portion size. Items such as pastries, donuts, chips and chocolate bars contain notoriously high levels of fat and low or no nutrients. Suggested alternatives, depending on their specific ingredients and nutritional value, are fruit, granola bars. Fruit is a preferred choice as such a low percentage of elementary aged children are getting their recommended servings of fruits and vegetables.

In addition, the Dietitians of Canada recommend that portion size of food and beverage products be altered in vending machines to reflect appropriate portions for elementary school-aged children. There is a strong correlation between the increase in portion size and the increase in average body weights over those time periods.

The following table identifies recommended healthy food and beverage choices from the Dietitians of Canada. Ontario school boards will be asked to follow these recommendations when replacing vending machine content with healthier selections:

Dietitians of Canada Criteria and Examples of Foods for Ontario Elementary School Vending Machines

Food and Beverage Group	Criteria for Selection	Recommended Foods (Snacks), Beverages and Serving Sizes	Essential Nutrients Provided	Comments
Grain Products <i>Choose whole grain and enriched products more often.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – low in saturated fat – source of fibre – source of B vitamins and iron – fat limit of 5 g 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – grain-based bars: 30 to 40 g – muffins: 55 g – snack breads: 55 g – cookies: 30 g – crackers: 20 g 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – complex carbohydrates (starch) – B vitamins – fibre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Foods high in saturated and trans fat increase the risk of coronary artery disease.
Vegetables and Fruit <i>Choose dark green and orange vegetables and fruit more often.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – good source of vitamin C and/or vitamin A and/or folacin and/or fibre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – fresh, whole fruit: 1 piece – canned fruit or 100% fruit sauces: 125 mL – fresh vegetables: 125 g (with a low-fat dip) – 100% dried fruit: 40 g – 100% fruit juice – vegetable juice – 125–250 mL for all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – vitamin C – vitamin A – folacin – fibre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Fruits and vegetables provide needed nutrients. – If dried fruit is eaten as a snack, brushing of teeth should be encouraged. It is recommended that dried fruit be eaten as part of a meal. – Beverage serving size should be limited to 250 mL, which is equal to 2 servings of fruit or vegetables, or 125 mL, which is equal to 1 serving.
Milk and Milk Products <i>Choose lower-fat milk products more often.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – lower fat or non-fat (yogurt & milk: 2% or less M.F.; cheese: 20% or less M.F.) – foods: source or good source of calcium – beverages: good or excellent source of calcium & excellent source of vitamin D 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – yogurt: 175 mL – cheese: 30–50 g – milk puddings: 125 mL – milk or flavoured milk – yogurt-based drinks – calcium fortified soy beverages – 250 mL for all beverages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – calcium – vitamin A – calcium – vitamin D 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Beverage serving size should be 250 mL, consistent with <i>Canada's Food Guide to healthy Eating Habits</i> – There is an increased need for calcium prior to puberty: 3 to 4 servings per day.
Meat and Alternatives <i>Choose leaner meats, poultry, and fish, as well as dried peas, beans, and lentils more often.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – sodium: 480 mg or less – source of B vitamins – source of iron 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ready-to-eat legumes (plain, uncoated): 30 g 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – protein – B vitamins 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – It is strongly recommended that foods containing peanuts or other nuts not be made available in schools, since some students may have life-threatening allergies to nuts.
Other Foods <i>Taste and enjoyment can also come from other foods and beverages that are not part of the four food groups.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – low in fat and low in saturated fat – sodium: 480 mg or less – source of at least one vitamin or mineral 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – pretzels: 50 g – plain popcorn: 50 g – baked chips: 50 g – water 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Plain water is a healthy beverage choice, and is the preferred fluid for proper hydration.

To better understand the label on foods, here are the general definitions of nutrient criteria (per reference amount and serving size on the package).

Low fat	3 g or less fat
Low saturated fat	2 g or less saturated fatty acids and trans fatty acids combined and 15% or less energy from saturated fatty acids plus trans fatty acids
Source of calcium	5% or more of the daily value (55 mg or more of calcium)
Good source of calcium	15% or more of the daily value (165 mg or more of calcium)
Excellent source of calcium	25% or more of the daily value (275 mg or more of calcium)
Good source of vitamin C	30% or more of daily value (18 mg or more)
Good source of vitamin A	15% or more of the daily value (150 RE or more)
Good source of folacin	15% or more of daily value (33 mcg or more)
Excellent source of vitamin D	25% or more of the daily value (1.25 mcg)
Source of B vitamins	5% or more of daily value – Thiamine – 0.07 mg or more; Niacin – 1.15 NE or more
Vitamin B6	0.09 mg or more
Source of iron	5% or more of daily value – 0.7 mg or more
Source of fibre	2 g or more
480 mg or less sodium	is based on the Heart Health Claim (Health Canada)

HEALTHY CHOICES CREATING HEALTHY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The Ministry of Education is directing schools to take a comprehensive approach to supporting healthy eating for children as soon as possible. This includes providing specific guidelines about the kinds of food and beverage choices that are being made available by schools and providing proper nutrition education that will enable the students to make healthy choices away from the school environment.

With the release of the recommendations for school vending machines, the Minister is issuing a directive for all schools to complete the removal of specific food and beverage items on the Dietitians of Canada list as soon as possible.

“Getting junk food out of elementary school vending machines is the next step in our plan to make all of Ontario’s schools healthier places to learn.”

- Minister Gerard Kennedy

HEALTHY NEXT STEPS

As part of the government’s plan, it has provided \$20 million to school boards to help them open up schools to non-profit community groups for use after hours and year-round. Already, boards have begun to sign on to the voluntary agreement, providing increased opportunities for students and other members of the community to stay active. Next steps in the plan will include ensuring students get 20 minutes of daily physical activity by next fall and encouraging parents to pack healthy school lunches.