

Nutrition in Toronto School Cafeterias

Date:	June 2, 2008
To:	Board of Health
From:	Medical Officer of Health
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of nutrition in school cafeterias in Toronto and makes recommendations for the Board of Health to advocate for the development and adoption of comprehensive nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold and/or served in schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. the Board of Health urge the Ontario Minister of Education and the Minister of Health Promotion to establish mandatory, comprehensive nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold and/or served in elementary and secondary schools, including school cafeterias, vending machines, special food days, school events, canteens/tuck shops and food-related fundraising activities, and to support the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these standards;
2. the Board of Health recommend to the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board that, in the absence of mandatory, comprehensive provincial nutrition standards for schools, local comprehensive nutrition standards for Toronto schools be developed, implemented, monitored and evaluated in consultation with the Medical Officer of Health.

Financial Impact

There is no financial impact arising from the recommendations in this report other than what was approved in the 2008 Operating Budget.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on May 20, 2008, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to report on the nutritional quality and safety of food in school cafeterias in Toronto.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Studies of the eating habits of children and youth consistently demonstrate that many school-age children fail to meet healthy eating recommendations. Adequate nutrition is essential for healthy growth and development, and rising obesity rates and inadequate nutrition contribute to the incidence of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, stroke, hypertension and some cancers.

Schools play a key role in providing an environment conducive to healthy eating, as well as the educational foundation for students to learn health-related knowledge and skills through the Ontario curriculum. A recent study in Philadelphia (1) demonstrated that schools participating in a multi-component School Nutrition Policy Initiative were able to halve the odds of students in grades 4-6 becoming overweight over a two-year period, as compared to non-participating schools. The five components of the comprehensive initiative included:

- (i) school self-assessment
- (ii) nutrition education
- (iii) nutrition policy (i.e. nutrition standards for foods and beverages)
- (iv) social marketing; and
- (v) parent outreach.

In 2007 the Institute of Medicine (IOM) in the United States released *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way toward Healthier Youth* (3). Since there are already nutrition standards for federally funded meal programs in the U.S., the IOM standards address all other foods and beverages offered at school, with consideration given to developmental differences between children in elementary, middle and high schools.

In 2007, the Centre for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) published *Are Schools Making the Grade? School Nutrition Policies across Canada* (2), comparing provincial nutrition criteria for schools with the IOM standards. Ontario received a grade of “F”, while most other provinces, including Alberta and Nova Scotia who have developed and implemented comprehensive nutrition standards, received higher grades. Nonetheless, the CSPI found many of the provincial nutrition standards/guidelines to be weak and inconsistent, e.g., permitting the sale of nutrient-poor foods, and without any enforcement measures in place.

The Government of Ontario recently amended the Education Act through the adoption of Bill 8, the Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act (4), which received Royal Assent on April 27, 2008. The new legislation adds provisions to the Education Act to regulate the artificial trans fat content of all food and beverages sold in a school cafeteria. The Act

gives authority to the Minister of Education to create policies, guidelines and regulations governing nutritional standards for all food and beverages provided on school premises or in connection with a school-related activity. School boards are required to ensure that food and beverages sold in vending machines comply with nutritional standards set out in regulations. To date, the Minister of Education has not released any further details on specific nutrition standards being developed for vending machines or school cafeterias, and the amended Act includes a provision to exempt special event days.

Toronto Public Health (TPH) has the legislative authority to enforce food safety standards for school cafeterias and student nutrition programs under the Health Protection and Promotion Act, Food Premises Regulation 562/90. TPH does not have authority to regulate nutrition standards in school cafeterias and student nutrition programs (SNPs) although SNPs are requested to follow a Nutrition Standard for SNPs as a condition of municipal funding.

Toronto Public Health staff work with school communities to develop strategies to provide and promote nutritious food and beverage choices in the school environment, as part of a comprehensive school health approach. TPH staff members provide support to 15 school cafeterias participating in the EatSmart! School Cafeteria program, a voluntary program in Ontario to provide an “award of excellence” to school cafeterias that meet food safety and basic nutrition standards. Students are encouraged to be involved in all aspects of EatSmart!, such as developing point-of-purchase promotional strategies.

During 2007/08, the University of Waterloo conducted a School Health Environment Survey (SHES) in up to 500 Ontario elementary and secondary schools, which included about 80 schools in Toronto. The overall response rate in Toronto schools was 59%. The purpose of SHES is to assess factors in the school environment that contribute to healthy eating and physical activity among children and youth. It is recommended that schools share their survey results with their local public health units, so that public health staff can support the schools in taking action related to the issues identified in the survey.

In March 2008, the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) approved a report on the RFP Process of Standardization for Cafeterias (5), which includes a comprehensive set of nutrition standards developed in consultation with Toronto Public Health staff. Menus offered by cafeteria service providers for cafeterias and snack vending machines must offer at least 80% of foods and beverages from the ‘Choose Most Often’ category and no more than 20% from the ‘Choose Sometimes’ category. Cafeteria service providers will be required to be a member of school strategic planning teams comprised of the principal, vice-principal and/or other staff member, student(s) and parent(s) to inform and manage food expectations and pricing and achieve nutrition standards. Secondary schools will also be asked to utilize students from TCDSB culinary arts/food hospitality programs in cafeteria service delivery. Although only up to 7 of the 32 cafeteria service contracts are affected in this year’s RFP process, the plan is for all cafeterias to eventually implement the nutrition standards. TPH staff will provide training on the nutrition standards to all of the cafeteria service providers in the TCDSB

system, in the hopes that other vendors will start to make changes well in advance of future RFP processes.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has a Nutrition Policy Statement that was developed after amalgamation and will be updated this year. In 2007, the TDSB approved a plan for the reduction of artificial trans fat served in TDSB operated cafeterias to ensure consistency with recommendations from the Toronto Board of Health, including a goal of eliminating artificial trans fat entirely by September 2008. The Board also approved TDSB staff to work with contracted caterers in non-TDSB operated cafeterias in an effort to meet the same guidelines. TDSB has a Healthy Pricing Strategy for cafeterias, under which healthy choices are priced below market value and choices with minimal nutrition content are priced above market value, with a goal of making healthy choices more affordable for students.

COMMENTS

The Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act marks an important milestone in addressing nutrition in Ontario schools; however, it is crucial for the Minister of Education to develop mandatory, comprehensive nutrition standards for all food and beverages provided on school premises or in connection with a school-related activity and to provide support for implementation, monitoring and evaluation of these standards. Experiences from other jurisdictions have demonstrated that guidelines and other voluntary initiatives to encourage the availability of nutritious foods and beverages at school are inconsistently implemented and are not enforced. Furthermore, establishing standards and policies without support for implementation and monitoring also leads to inconsistent interpretation and application. Examples of support required for successful implementation include training of school administrators/school staff/foodservice operators, curriculum support, promotional activities, and a school community wide social marketing campaign. Examples of necessary monitoring and evaluation support would include tools for schools to monitor progress and an accreditation system or report card; this is crucial for maintaining sustainable changes in the school environment. Involvement of students and parents in consultation and decision-making is also essential to meeting the diverse needs of each school community.

Addressing nutrition standards for foods/beverages in school cafeterias and in vending machines is important, but standards must also apply to other aspects of the school environment, such as foods and beverages sold in canteens/tuck shops, at special events and on special food days, as well as for food-related fundraising activities. Even if the nutritional content of foods/beverages at schools improves greatly, more work is needed to develop innovative strategies to promote healthy eating, both in the curriculum and through opportunities for students to develop health-related knowledge and skills. A comprehensive approach to school nutrition is required to improve the health of the student population.

CONTACT

Carol Timmings
Healthy Living Director
Toronto Public Health
Tel: 416-392-1355
Fax: 416-392-0713
Email: ctimming@toronto.ca

Judi Wilkie
Healthy Living Manager
Toronto Public Health
Tel: 416-338-1671
Fax: 416-338-6299
Email: jwilkie@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Dr. David McKeown
Medical Officer of Health

References:

1. Foster, Gary D., et al. A Policy-based School Intervention to Prevent Overweight and Obesity. *Pediatrics*, 121(4):794-802, April 2008.
2. Centre for Science in the Public Interest, Ottawa. Are Schools Making the Grade? School Nutrition Policies across Canada, 2007. Available at http://www.cspinet.org/canada/pdf/makingthegrade_1007.pdf
3. Institute of Medicine. Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way toward Healthier Youth, 2007. Available at <http://www.iom.edu/CMS/3788/30181/42502.aspx>
4. Minister of Education, Government of Ontario. Bill 8, 2008. Available at http://www.ontla.on.ca/bills/bills-files/39_Parliament/Session1/b008ra.pdf
5. Toronto Catholic District School Board. Report Regarding Cafeteria Services, 2008. Available at <http://www.tcdsb.org/trustees/Agendas/Admin,%202008-03-19/Admin%20Agenda,%202008-03-19,%20Report%20regarding%20Cafeteria%20Services.pdf>