

## **Working with Schools to Improve the Health and Well-being of Children and Youth**

**Date:** October 22, 2025

**To:** Board of Health

**From:** Medical Officer of Health

**Wards:** All

### **SUMMARY**

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As mandated by the [School Health Guideline, 2018](#) of the Ontario Public Health Standards, Toronto Public Health collaborates with school boards and schools to assist with the implementation of health-related curricula and health needs to achieve optimal health of school-aged children and youth.

This report presents an overview of the health services Toronto Public Health provides to schools to promote and protect the health and well-being of children and youth. These services focus on upstream initiatives and early intervention to strengthen protective factors and reduce risk factors that impact student's health and well-being. The range of services, outlined in Attachment 1, includes nutrition, mental health promotion, substance use prevention, physical activity, sexual health, dental and oral care, and infectious disease prevention services.

The [Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy](#) is an agreement between Toronto Public Health and the four school boards to create healthy school environments for children and youth through collective action. Its goals are to strengthen the partnership between Toronto Public Health and the School Boards, establish a workplan with shared goals, share data and communicate on joint initiatives, and conduct further research on the health of students, including their mental health and well-being. This report recommends that Toronto Public Health continue collaborating with school boards and initiate the development of the next Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy to launch in 2027.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to continue collaborating with school boards and initiate the development of the next Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy to launch in 2027.

## **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

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There is no financial impact resulting from the adoption of the recommendation in this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact Section.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

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On June 25 and 26, 2025, City Council adopted item EX24.3 - A Vision and Strategy for a Universal School Food Program in Toronto, recommending a vision and strategy for Student Nutrition Programs where a universal morning meal program will be implemented by the 2026/2027 school year and a universal lunch program implemented by 2030.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EX24.3>

On December 17, 2024, City Council adopted item HL18.5 - Strengthening and expanding the Into Kids' Health program and authorized the Medical Officer of Health to enter into agreements, on an ongoing basis, with the Toronto school boards (Toronto District School Board, Toronto Catholic District School Board, Mon Avenir and Conseil scolaire Viamonde) for the transfer of funds in the total amount of \$300,000 or less per year as part of the Into Kids' Health program within the approved Toronto Public Health budget.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.HL18.5>

On November 18, 2024, the Board of Health adopted item HL18.3 - Addressing Routine Immunization Rates Among School-Aged Children and Youth, which provided an overview of TPH's efforts to facilitate high vaccination rates among elementary and secondary school-aged students and prevent vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks in schools and communities.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.HL18.3>

On September 11, 2023, the Board of Health adopted item HL6.1 which provided an overview of the current programs operated by teams across TPH to support the health needs of school-aged children and youth, and key priorities and actions for the future.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.HL6.1>

On April 11, 2022, the Board of Health adopted item HL36.3 which provided an update on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school-age children and youth, including current programs operated by Toronto Public Health to support this population.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.HL36.3>

## COMMENTS

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### Ontario Public Health Standards

#### *Mandates and Approaches That Guide School Health Service Delivery*

Toronto Public Health (TPH) is mandated by the [Ontario Public Health Standards \(OPHS\)](#) to collaborate with school boards and schools, and in accordance with the [School Health Guideline, 2018](#), to assist with the implementation of health-related curricula and health needs in schools. The goal is to achieve optimal health of school-aged children and youth through partnership and collaboration with school boards and schools. Priorities are guided by data on the health status of school-age children and youth and input from school board partners. As previously reported in Item [2022.HL36.3](#) and Item [2023.HL6.1](#), the COVID-19 pandemic had unintended impacts for many of Toronto's school-age children and youth. These impacts included challenges related to mental health, substance use, nutrition, physical activity, and access to dental health services and routine vaccines. This report provides an overview of the health services TPH provides to schools to promote and protect the health and well-being of children and youth. It outlines how programming aligns with municipal and provincial priorities, key partnerships driving this work, and the services that have been re-established and expanded following the pandemic.

The delivery of school health services is guided by multiple approaches outlined in the OPHS, including the Comprehensive School Health (CSH) framework, the [Foundations for a Healthy School \(FHS\) Framework](#), and the principle of proportionate universalism. The CSH is an internationally recognized framework implemented in Canada with organizations such as the Joint Consortium for School Health, while the FHS is a provincial framework applied in Ontario school boards. Both provide a holistic, planned, and integrated way to create healthy school environments and improve student learning by focusing on the whole child and student, including cognitive, emotional, social and physical development. The effectiveness of this approach relies on collaboration between health sector, education sector, parents, students and community stakeholders. The FHS also aligns with the Ministry of Education's [Kindergarten–12 School Effectiveness Framework \(K-12 SEF\)](#) through five interconnected areas:

- curriculum, teaching and learning
- school and classroom leadership
- student engagement
- social and physical environments
- home, school and community partnerships

Toronto Public Health uses a proportionate universalism approach in the delivery of school health services. All schools benefit from TPH's universal health services. In line with proportionate universalism, schools with higher needs receive more intensive and tailored services to address barriers and promote equitable outcomes.<sup>1</sup> School board indices are used to identify the level of need of a particular school community and prioritize resource allocation based on factors such as income, language (e.g., French), and local population (e.g., Indigenous and Black students). Out of 815 publicly funded schools, there are approximately 390 priority schools. These schools receive enhanced

services through a dedicated School Liaison Public Health Nurse (SLPHN) assigned to their school.<sup>2</sup>

These approaches guide school health service delivery which promotes and protects the health of students by creating a positive school climate. Health is integrated into all aspects of the school environment, addressing students' physical, social, mental and emotional health. A positive school climate fosters a strong sense of belonging, which is associated with improved student attendance, academic achievement, resilience, confidence, mental health, self-esteem, sleep quality, and reductions in suicidal ideation and depression.<sup>3</sup> By focusing on upstream initiatives and early intervention, TPH's school health services aim to strengthen protective factors and reduce risk factors that impact student's health and well-being.

## **Collaboration**

### *Collaboration with local schools to deliver school health services*

Toronto Public Health serves over 350,000 students across four school boards at 815 schools.<sup>4</sup> As outlined in the OPHS, TPH provides school health services in the areas of mental health promotion, infectious disease prevention, nutrition, physical activity, substance use prevention, dental and oral care, and sexual health. School health services are delivered by multiple programs across TPH. These services:

- prevent infectious diseases through immunization and infection control
- promote vision health and comprehensive eye exams
- improve oral health through dental screenings
- promote mental health and prevent substance use through education, student leadership initiatives, consultation and referrals
- encourage physical activity through student engagement initiatives
- promote healthy eating through food literacy and student nutrition programs
- promote healthy sexuality through education, outreach and workshops; and
- create healthy environments through education and inspections

The School Health Team consists of health professionals (Public Health Nurses, Public Health Dietitians, Health Promotion Specialists, Nutrition Promotion Consultants and Managers) who collaborate to provide services to schools, school communities, and school boards. All schools have access to online resources and essential TPH services such as dental and immunization programs. Schools may also request consultation, resources and referrals from a SLPHN, who serves as a critical link between TPH and schools to strengthen coordination and collaboration.

A full listing of TPH School Health Services can be found in Attachment 1.

### *Collaboration with Four School Boards to Advance Health*

Toronto Public Health regularly collaborates and consults with the four Toronto school boards (Toronto District School Board [TDSB], Toronto Catholic District School Board [TCDSB], Conseil scolaire Viamonde, and Conseil scolaire catholique Mon Avenir) to discuss public health issues. The [Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy \(2022-2026\)](#) formalizes the commitment of the Toronto School Boards and TPH to work in

partnership to promote the well-being of children and youth through joint strategic planning, collaboration, data sharing and evaluation. The goals of the Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy are:

- to collectively advocate for and create healthy school environments that support the health and well-being of children and youth.
- to establish a work plan through identification of shared goals and priorities.
- to foster synergies through communication and data sharing agreements in relation to joint initiatives between partners.
- to conduct further research on the health of children and youth in Toronto, including mental health and well-being, to be used to measure the performance of interventions and actions undertaken.

School Board Directors of Education and TPH senior leadership meet regularly to provide input on multi-year planning, identify areas of mutual interest, and explore opportunities for collaboration. In alignment with the OPHS and one of our partnership goals, a key area of collaboration is improving access to data. TPH collects, analyzes and reports on data related to school-aged children and youth. These data are shared with school boards and schools to identify public health needs, monitor population level health outcomes, and inform the development of public health interventions. The school boards play an important role in data collection and dissemination, including contributions to surveys such as the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) and sharing enrolment data with TPH to assist with implementation of the immunization and dental programs. A key priority for 2026 will be the continued implementation of the goals of the Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy as it enters its final year. This report recommends that TPH continue collaborating with school boards and initiate the development of the next Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy to launch in 2027.

#### *Collaboration with Municipal and Provincial Partners to strengthen Health Curriculum and school environments*

The Ministry of Education provides policy direction and system leadership to school boards and collaborates with the Ministry of Health and local public health units to align school-based initiatives with the OPHS. Toronto Public Health contributes to the implementation of Ministry of Education's Policy/Program Memorandums in schools across a range of topics, such as mental health, nutrition, vaping, cellphone use, daily physical activity, and communication to parents. Toronto Public Health also participates in provincial tables that facilitate communication and collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Public Health.

Toronto Public Health consults and collaborates with other City divisions to advance shared priorities related to children and youth. This includes contributing to the implementation of City-wide strategies by participating in working groups and providing public health guidance on initiatives. For example, as part of [SafeTO: A Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan](#), TPH collaborates with Social Development to participate on Integrated Safety Coordination Teams, which are multi-sector teams comprised of frontline staff from various institutions who collaborate to assess and mitigate the risks and impacts of violence in select neighbourhoods in Toronto.

## *Collaboration with Indigenous Partners to Improve Health Outcomes for Indigenous Students*

Toronto Public Health collaborates with Indigenous partners to address the health needs of Toronto's Indigenous communities. In partnership with the TDSB and the Urban Indigenous Education Centre (UIEC), TPH collaborates with Indigenous-focused schools and supports Indigenous students within their school communities. This work is guided by the UIEC Elders Council, which is Indigenous led for Indigenous peoples, and is dedicated to enhancing Indigenous student well-being, achievement, and cultural safety as it pertains to Indigenous health care. An example of how TPH addresses the health needs of Indigenous students is by engaging with Indigenous community partners, including Indigenous primary care service providers to facilitate and promote immunization opportunities for Indigenous students.

These partnerships aim to meet shared goals towards complying with the *Immunization of School Pupils Act, 1990* (ISPA), helping to protect communities from vaccine preventable diseases and preventing student suspensions. In the 2024-2025 school year, TPH facilitated immunizations for Indigenous students from the 2016 birth cohort at risk of suspension under the ISPA due to incomplete immunization records through:

- culturally responsive engagement, including promotional messaging at community events such as Drum Socials and Pow Wows to connect with parents and caregivers.
- in-person events with school principals to assist families with updating immunization records in advance of suspension deadlines to reduce barriers to ISPA compliance.
- coordination with UIEC for a vaccine clinic for Indigenous populations.

## **Ongoing Opportunities to Improve Student Health and Well-being**

Two focus areas for TPH are student nutrition and immunization. The City of Toronto is making significant investments towards expanding Student Nutrition Programs (SNPs) in schools. In June 2025, City Council adopted recommendations on a vision and strategy for SNPs where a universal morning meal program will be implemented by the 2026/2027 school year and a universal lunch program implemented by 2030. Toronto Public Health is working to support the phased expansion of a universal morning meal program. This fall it is expected that 685 school communities or 81 per cent of Toronto's public schools will operate a SNP.

TPH implements and enforces Ontario's Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA) and the accompanying [Immunization for Children in Schools and Licensed Child Care Settings Protocol, 2018](#), which requires students who attend elementary and secondary school to be vaccinated against nine designated diseases or to have a valid exemption. A priority for TPH is to ensure high vaccine coverage in students and reduce suspension from school (due to non-compliance with the ISPA).

Collaboration is essential to effectively delivering school health services and improving the health of school-age children and youth. Toronto Public Health will continue to work with school boards and system partners to create healthy school environments that promote the overall health and well-being of students, including their physical, social,

emotional and mental health. To achieve this goal, TPH will closely monitor the health status and outcomes of school-age children and youth to inform program planning, respond to emerging issues and strengthen impact through collaboration with schools.

## **Toronto Public Health Strategic Impact**

The following priorities and objectives are relevant to the health of school-aged children and youth:

*Priority 1. Strengthen health protection, disease prevention and emergency preparedness, and the following objective:*

- c. Effectively communicate with the public about how they can protect their health.

*Priority 2. Promote health and well-being across the lifespan, and the following objectives:*

- a. Reduce the burden of chronic and infectious diseases across the lifespan.
- b. Prioritize effective interventions for children and youth to meet their changing needs.
- d. Advocate for healthy social, natural, and built environments and collaborate with partners on initiatives that advance these goals.

*Priority 4. Advocate to advance health equity, and the following objectives:*

- b. Collaborate with partners across multiple sectors to address local health needs.
- c. Share evidence, advocate and collaborate to influence actions that impact population

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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1 Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (2018). Health Equity Guideline. Available from: <https://files.ontario.ca/moh-guidelines-health-equity-guideline-en-2018.pdf>

2 Toronto Public Health. (2025). School Health Data.

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3 National Children’s Bureau (2024). School Belonging: A literature review by Goldsmiths, University of London, on behalf of the National Children’s Bureau. Available at:[https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/School%20Belonging%20-%20A%20Literature%20Review%202024\\_2.pdf](https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/School%20Belonging%20-%20A%20Literature%20Review%202024_2.pdf)

4 Toronto Public Health. (2025). School Health Data.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

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Attachment 1: Toronto Public Health's School Health Services