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Policy/Program Memorandum 138

Date of Issue: October 5, 2017

Effective: Until revoked or modified

Subject: Daily physical activity in elementary schools, grades 1-8

Application: Directors of Education

Supervisory Officers and Secretary-Treasurers of School Authorities

Principals of Elementary Schools

Introduction

The purpose of this memorandum is to ensure that all elementary school students ^[1] have the opportunity to be physically active during the school day. Physical activity is essential for the healthy growth and development of children and youth. It can have a positive impact on their physical fitness and help lay the foundation for healthy, productive lives. Participating in physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour is known to enhance well-being, which is an important element of academic achievement and overall student success. Providing elementary students with opportunities to be physically active supports two of the goals for education in Ontario – promoting well-being and achieving excellence – as outlined in *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario, 2014*. Engaging students in daily physical activity also helps build a culture of physical activity in schools, which can instill the value of physical activity for life and help to improve health and learning outcomes for all children and youth.

The requirement

School boards ^[2] must ensure that all elementary school students, including students with special education needs, have a minimum of twenty minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each school day during instructional time.

Practices for consideration

The Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines, a document based on recent research, recommends that, “for optimal health benefits, children and youth (aged 5–17 years) should achieve high levels of physical activity, low levels of sedentary behaviour, and sufficient sleep each day.” ^[3] These guidelines also recommend “trading indoor time for outdoor time”, and encourage children and youth to participate in a variety of physical activities, performed in various environments and contexts.

To enhance their well-being and achievement, all students should strive to achieve high levels of physical activity and limit sedentary behaviour every day. To support them in reaching this goal, educators may want to

consider breaking up longer periods of sedentary time during the school day by building movement opportunities into instructional time.

Implementation

School boards are responsible for the implementation of this policy and for related training. It is the collective responsibility of principals and other education professionals to ensure that students receive at least twenty minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity during instructional time every school day.

All activities must be adapted, as appropriate, to ensure that all students, including students with special education needs, can participate in them. Such adaptations must be consistent with the accommodations and/or modifications outlined in a student's Individual Education Plan.

Daily physical activity may be incorporated into the instructional day in a variety of ways. For instance, integrating physical activity across various curriculum areas in individual blocks of five, ten, or fifteen minutes of moderate to vigorous activity would be an effective way of meeting the total minimum daily requirement of twenty minutes, and also of creating a culture of physical activity in the school. Twenty minutes or more of moderate to vigorous physical activity during a scheduled health and physical education class would also meet the daily physical activity requirement. Since physical activity is only one component of a comprehensive health and physical education program, there will be days when a health and physical education class does not include at least twenty minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity. On these days and on days when no health and physical education class is scheduled, other opportunities for accumulating at least twenty minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity during the instructional day must be provided.

Safety

As indicated in The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Health and Physical Education, 2015, attention to safety, including physical and emotional safety, is an integral part of instructional planning and implementation.

The primary responsibility for ensuring safe practices rests with the school board and its employees. The principal is responsible for ensuring that all students, including students with special education needs, have the opportunity to participate in daily physical activity in a safe manner. Potential risks must be identified and procedures developed to prevent or minimize, and respond to, incidents and injuries.

As noted in the Health and Physical Education curriculum document (p. 15), “It is also critical to student success to create an atmosphere in which students of all body shapes and sizes, abilities, gender identities and sexual orientations, and ethnocultural, racial, and religious backgrounds feel accepted, comfortable, and free from harassment.”

Reporting and accountability

School boards will develop and apply a process to monitor the implementation at the school level of the requirement outlined in this memorandum. School boards and principals should also take appropriate action to ensure that parents are kept informed of their children's participation in daily physical activity.

Updated: July 15, 2021

Footnotes

- [1] [^]For the purposes of this memorandum only, elementary school students refers to students in Grades 1 to 8 in publicly funded schools.

- [2] [^]In this document, school board(s) and board(s) refer to district school boards and school authorities.
- [3] [^]Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines: An Integration of Physical Activity, Sedentary Behaviour, and Sleep (Toronto: Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, 2016).