

Ministry of Education Wellness Consultation Comments from Dietitians of Canada (Ontario)

March 2017

Dietitians of Canada is pleased to provide input to the Ministry of Education Well-Being Strategy. We commend the inclusion of multiple domains of well-being (cognitive, emotional, physical, social) and the broad approach to engagement. As the professional association for Registered Dietitians in Ontario, we strive for excellence in advancing health through food and nutrition, and promote evidence-based advice. Our input is focused on food- and nutrition-related aspects of well-being.

Physical Well-being and Healthy Eating

Healthy eating provides a foundation for physical well-being, and schools provide an opportunity to support students in making healthy choices and gaining knowledge and food skills, leading to developing food literacy that guides lifelong healthy eating habits. Dietitians of Canada has been involved in development of food and nutrition standards for schools in many provinces, including Ontario.

Recommendations:

- Incorporate food literacy and food skills education throughout the K-12 curriculum. Evidence suggests that food preparation and cooking skills result in improved diet quality¹. This recommendation has been put forward by Dietitians of Canada and other stakeholders to the Healthy Kids Panel² and incorporated in Recommendation 2.8 of the panel's report³. The Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy highlights the importance of food skills in increasing consumption of vegetables and fruit; school-based food literacy and food skills education is included in the OFNS Strategic Direction 2.1⁴.
- Have Registered Dietitians, the experts in food and nutrition, develop nutrition-related curriculum to ensure that current evidence provides the foundation for curriculum, and that misinformation is avoided.
- Improve the school food environment by promoting healthy food choices at special events and fundraising activities. Fresh from the Farm: Healthy Fundraising for Ontario Schools (www.freshfromfarm.ca) helps schools raise funds by selling fresh Ontario root vegetables and apples. This program can support food skills and food literacy by being incorporated into classroom activities.
- Ensure that Ministry of Education School Food and Beverage Policy (PPM150) undergoes a comprehensive evaluation to determine its effectiveness in supporting healthy eating; results of the evaluation should be used to inform revisions as needed.

Cognitive and Emotional Well-being and Healthy Eating

Linkages between mental health and nutrition continue to be discovered, adding to the existing evidence base. Dietitians of Canada's position paper on Nutrition and Mental Health provides summaries of the effect of healthy eating on promotion of positive mental health and prevention of mental health conditions⁵. For example, improved classroom behavior, academic improvement, increased problem-solving skills and social competence have been associated with nutrition. Along with the recommendations to improve the school food environment and food literacy, it is important that promotion of physical well-being is done in a positive way, avoiding negative messaging that can impact emotional well-being or even trigger eating disorders in extreme cases⁶.

Recommendations:

- Avoid weight focus related to healthy eating, emphasizing instead concepts such as energy to play and be active weight bias among students and teachers has been identified and must be mitigated^{7,8}
- Use positive messaging to encourage physical well-being through healthy eating and physical activity; food shaming, "bad" foods, and other negative messages should be avoided

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