

Dietitians of Canada (Manitoba Region)

Brief to Manitoba's Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education

Manitoba Government

May 31, 2019

Dietitians of Canada is pleased to provide input to the Manitoba government's Manitoba Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education. We commend the comprehensive independent review and opportunity to submit a formal brief for the public hearings. As the professional association for dietitians in Manitoba, Dietitians of Canada strives for excellence in advancing health through food and nutrition and ensuring dietitians are recognized as the most credible, trustworthy source of food and nutrition information. We have been a long-standing partner with the Manitoba government on the Manitoba Healthy Food in Schools initiative. Our input is focused on food and nutrition related aspects within education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Student Learning

1. Incorporate food literacy and food skills education throughout the K-12 curriculum. Integrating food literacy as a key component of the provincial literacy and numeracy strategy in Manitoba could result in educational, health and social success. Food makes learning relevant through everyday life.
2. Facilitate a collaborative approach in the development of nutrition-related curriculum that involves dietitians and other stakeholders who have specialized knowledge in developing and teaching nutrition-related curriculum to ensure that current evidence provides the foundation for curriculum and misinformation is avoided.
3. Encourage schools to involve dietitians in helping to shape and implement school nutrition policies and help create positive school nutrition environments, which can be integrated within existing mental health priorities.
4. Utilize Comprehensive School Health framework to assess, plan, implement and evaluate school health environments. Specifically, positive school nutrition environments are essential for students to achieve excellence and improve students' mental and physical wellbeing, ultimately ensuring they are ready to learn.
5. Ensure schools are reporting, monitoring, and evaluating school nutrition policies annually.

Teaching

6. Ensure school staff (administrators, teachers, those working hands-on with food) are supported to participate in ongoing learning and professional development opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills of food and nutrition and the connection to students' learning and health.

Funding

7. Increase and sustain annual funding for school breakfast, snack and lunch programs to improve access to nutritious food in schools, ultimately enhancing students' health, well-being and academic success.

Governance

8. Facilitate a collaborative approach to creating healthy school environments that would include multiple government departments and external stakeholders. Dietitians of Canada should be part of this coordinated approach.

BACKGROUND

Manitoba currently has one of the highest rates of type 2 diabetes in the world, and the number of children in Manitoba with this chronic disease is 12 times higher than any other province.¹ Health status during early education years is important, as it is during this time that students develop healthy habits through what they learn, and through the health-related choices they can make in their school food and nutrition environment.² Poor nutrition and food experiences not only increases the likelihood of developing physical health issues such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and malnutrition, but can negatively impact social and mental health.³ Poor nutrition has been linked to low self-esteem, depression, decreased attention span, and poor learning outcomes in the classroom.³

Socioeconomic status is also an important factor in childhood nutrition. In Manitoba, 1 in 8 households and 1 in 5 children are food insecure, meaning they have “inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints.”⁴ Individuals who are food insecure have an increased likelihood of developing one or more chronic physical and/or mental health conditions.⁵ Children currently spend a large portion of their time at school and have many food choice opportunities at school, which makes the school-built environment an important aspect in positively influencing a student's eating habits.³ Additionally, the built environments in which children live have the ability to promote physical activity, healthy food choices, mental health, and social well-being.¹ Healthy food systems within the built environment support the access and availability of healthy foods and reduce food insecurity by improving access to healthy foods in neighbourhoods and communities.^{1,6} Programs and policies that increase exposures to healthy built environments, such as the Comprehensive School Health (CSH) framework, can improve health over a lifetime, and be more effective than treating health problems as they arise later in life.¹

Dietitians are passionate about the potential of food to enhance lives and improve health. As the only regulated food and nutrition professionals, dietitians undergo comprehensive and rigorous training and are governed by the highest standards of education and ethics. Dietitians are required to stay on top of emerging research, skills and techniques. Dietitians work in a variety of settings, including with schools. In Manitoba, dietitians work collaboratively with multiple school stakeholders, community organizations, and researchers to deliver evidence-based food and nutrition advice that enhances students' health and learning in the school environment.

Comprehensive School Health

Health and education are interdependent: healthy students are better learners, and better-educated individuals are healthier. Research has shown that comprehensive school health (CSH) is an effective way to tap into that linkage, improving both health and educational outcomes and encouraging healthy behaviours that last a lifetime.⁷

CSH is an internationally recognized framework that aims to move beyond the individual to address school health as a whole, thereby increasing the number of health-enhancing behaviours while also improving educational outcomes in the classroom.⁸ The framework encompasses four main pillars: A) teaching and learning, B) social and physical environments, C) healthy school policy, and D) partnerships and services. All four pillars need to be addressed in order to implement a healthy school food and nutrition environment,² and ultimately promote health and wellness across the lifespan. According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, a ‘Healthy School Food and Nutrition Environment’ ensures students are provided with “nutritious and appealing foods and beverages, consistent and accurate messages about good nutrition, and ways to learn about and practice healthy eating”.⁹ Manitoba Healthy Food in Schools, a Manitoba government initiative in partnership with Dietitians of Canada, supports schools and the CSH framework to promote healthy eating, provide access to affordable healthy food and foster positive school food environments. A dietitian is available to provide one-on-one support to schools across the province to implement healthy eating policies and guidelines, provide expertise in menu planning and improve healthy eating environments. The CSH approach allows for individual schools to assess, plan and implement strategies to meet their unique needs.

A) Teaching and Learning

A healthy school food and nutrition environment within the CSH framework recognizes that schools are the ideal environment to teach and role model health promotion behaviours through both formal and informal education.⁷ Schools provide an opportunity to support students in making healthy choices and gaining knowledge and food skills, which leads to developing food literacy; improving diet quality and habits formed in childhood are more likely to last into adulthood.^{10,11} Food literacy is a collection of inter-related knowledge, skills, and behaviours required to plan, manage, select, prepare, and eat foods to meet needs and determine food intake.¹² These skills, knowledge and competencies are all needed to succeed in life after high school graduation and there are interconnections between education and the array of external factors that impact student learning and teaching. The “Food Literacy Competencies for Young Adults” framework can be used to inform curriculum development, including cross-curricular programming.¹³ Food literacy also promotes generic life skills and social competencies, such as effective communication, problem-solving, coping skills, resilience, self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are, in turn, determinants of positive mental health.¹⁴ It is important professional development be provided for educators to enhance good health education in the classroom.² It is also essential we acknowledge that food and eating are highly personal, it is especially important in our increasingly multi-cultural environment. Family values about food and eating are important for maintaining positive relationships with food, and should be respected and celebrated in the school setting.

B) Social and Physical Environment

Schools are widely acknowledged as an appropriate and logical environmental setting in which to promote healthy behaviors, and thus play an important role in the healthy school food and nutrition environment.² The school food and nutrition environment can include meal times, vending machines, cafeterias/canteens, classroom learning opportunities, nourishment programs, extracurricular activities, fundraising, and social events within the school.¹⁵ Health Canada's Dietary Guidelines for Health Care Professionals and Policy Makers can make an important contribution to nutritional health, as policies that reflect these guidelines can improve the food environment in settings such as schools and workplaces.⁶ Creating supportive environments across settings can help increase the positive influence that dietary guidelines can have on individuals, families and communities.

C) Healthy School Policy

Implementation of healthy food policies can increase Canadians' access to healthier foods as part of a broader vision for food policy in Canada.¹⁵ Evidence shows that school food and nutrition policies in Manitoba promote healthy patterns of eating focused on balance, variety, and moderation.¹⁵ In addition, school food and nutrition policies foster a healthy school food and nutrition environment and promote a learning plan that highlights the importance of healthy eating.¹⁶ Schools and school divisions across Canada have created and implemented school food and nutrition policies. Within Manitoba, school food and nutrition policies are mandatory per the Manitoba Public Schools Act.¹⁷

D) Partnerships and Services

Stakeholders in a healthy school food and nutrition environment include those who take a vested interest in the health and nutrition of the students, and the environment in which they grow and learn. This may include school administrators, teachers, school division/district superintendents, students, families, community partnerships, health professionals and researchers.¹⁴ Stakeholders are an important key component within the school food and nutrition environment, as they link the school to the broader community, and are involved in the funding, planning, implementing, and modifying programs and services built to enhance school nutrition. In order to understand possible challenges and barriers to implementing a healthy school food and nutrition environment, it is important to gather the opinions of stakeholders.²

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