

Priority Initiative

Champlain Healthy School-aged Children Initiative

“Investing in the Health of the Next Generation of Ontarians”

Priority Initiative Description

The Champlain Healthy School-aged Children Initiative aims to address childhood obesity by enabling children (ages 4 to 18) in the Champlain District to make healthy choices about nutrition and physical activity on a daily basis, and providing them with the skills to develop healthy food and activity behaviours for life. A multi-faceted approach will be adopted which targets school, home, and community environments and uses multiple intervention strategies including policy, social marketing, skills and knowledge training, and environmental supports to achieve its impact. The initiative will serve to mobilize and coordinate multiple stakeholders (public health, education, community, industry, primary and specialty care) committed to reducing the obesity epidemic in children and youth in the Champlain District. Together we will act to ensure the next generation of Ontarians is equipped with the skills, knowledge, and values required to prevent CVD and other chronic diseases.

Background and Rationale

Prevention efforts must begin in childhood if we are to effectively combat chronic disease in Ontario. Overweight and obesity is one of the biggest public health challenges facing Ontario today³⁰. Rates of overweight and obesity among children and youth in Ontario and Canada are reaching epidemic proportions²⁹. According to Statistics Canada, 27% of children aged 7 to 13 are overweight and 13% are obese²⁹. Rates of obesity and overweight in Canadian boys and girls have tripled over the last three decades. Moreover, the annual economic burden of obesity in Ontario is \$2.35 billion, representing 5.3% of the total provincial health care budget²⁹.

The primary cause of the rise in obesity is increased consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods combined with decreased levels of physical activity. Poor nutrition and lack of regular physical activity in children and youth are also linked to increased prevalence of CVD and other chronic disease risk factors in adults^{29,31}. Many socio-environmental factors are contributing to lower levels of physical activity and poor eating habits including: reduced physical education in the schools; increased television, computer, and video game use; urban sprawl; and increased access to high fat, high sugar, and high calorie foods.

The report from Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health, *Healthy Weights, Healthy Lives*, calls for immediate action to combat the obesity epidemic in Ontario's communities. The report was followed by the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion's *Action Plan on Healthy Eating and Active Living*^{29,32}.

Our Approach: Multi-sectoral Action Aimed at Shifting Social Norms

Childhood obesity is a complex issue that will not spontaneously resolve itself. A focus on lifestyle is essential to combat the obesity epidemic among children and reduce long-term risk factors for chronic illness, such as heart disease and cancer. Multi-faceted interventions that target students, school cafeterias, parents, and the community are more effective than interventions targeting one of these channels alone³⁵. It is necessary to engage school boards, government agencies, and the private sector to make the changes^{33,34}.

Promoting healthy eating and physical activity among our children is a priority of the CCPN. An inter-sectoral committee of representatives from public health, community health, specialty care, pediatric medicine, not-for-profit, and education sectors has been formed to develop a regionalized action plan for healthy weights in children and youth. The committee will develop a multi-faceted, region-wide strategy targeting schools, families (children and parents), and communities using multiple intervention channels including policy, social marketing, skills and knowledge training, and environmental supports to achieve its goals.

Goals and Objectives

The Champlain Healthy School-aged Children Initiative aims to address childhood obesity by enabling children (ages 4 to 18) in the Champlain District to make healthy choices about nutrition and physical activity on a daily basis, and providing them with the skills to develop healthy food and activity behaviours for life.

The objectives of the initiative are:

- To engage children and youth in more quality daily physical activity;
- To improve eating habits and encourage healthy food choices among school-aged children;
- To develop policies and strategies that lead to healthy environments for school-aged children – at home, at school, and in the community;
- To increase knowledge and skills among parents for supporting healthy eating and active living at home; and,
- To support training in the delivery of evidence-based physical activity and healthy eating programming amongst decision makers, educators, and health practitioners.

Framework for Action

The Champlain Healthy School-aged Children Initiative will have 4 core areas of action:

School Environments: To implement region-wide school policies targeting daily physical activity (both curriculum-based and after school) and healthy eating (cafeterias, vending machines, school lunches).

Classroom Action: To empower schools in the Champlain LHIN to create school action plans addressing physical activity and healthy eating in the school setting. These plans will: (a) enable children to receive the required physical activity during the school day in addition to increasing the opportunities for additional physical activities (classes, sport programs, recess activities, clubs, lessons, walking programs, 'walking school bus') to enjoy; and, (b) ensure that children have access to healthy food choices (hot lunches, snack programs, fundraising, etc).

Family & Community: To facilitate consistent, healthful messaging with parents that encourages positive role modeling around providing healthy eating and active living choices for their children. This includes messaging on appropriate grocery shopping choices, restaurant selection, as well as how to increase involvement in physical activity and minimize screen time. Communities will be encouraged to improve their policies around enhanced access to physical activity facilities and programs for children and youth.

Leadership Development & Capacity Building: To support training of policy makers, educators, and practitioners in evidence-based approaches to promoting healthy living in children in youth.

Program Planning & Implementation Activities

A phased approach will be adopted to support the delivery of action in each of the 4 core areas.

a) Creation of Multi-sectoral Leadership Team

A leadership team from key sectors has been mobilized to provide leadership to the Champlain Healthy School-aged Children Initiative. A series of consultation meetings will be used to expand the leadership team to ensure adequate regional representation from partners in the education, recreation, not-for-profit, private, and community sectors.

b) Environmental Scanning

Foundational research has been undertaken to gather baseline data and support implementation activities. Specifically, two activities are underway:

Attitudinal Research Study on Healthy Weights, Active Living & Healthy Eating

Parents play a pivotal role in shaping the development of child eating and activity habits. A large attitudinal survey will be conducted among parents of children aged 4 to 12 in a total of 1940 households in the Champlain District. The survey will gather information regarding parental attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs surrounding childhood overweight and obesity and their associated healthy eating and physical activity behaviours. Information gathered will be used to inform the development of a social marketing campaign for the Champlain region and will form the basis of a regional call to action to address healthy active living in Champlain children and youth.

Scan of School Health Promoting Policies

An environmental scan is being conducted to examine existing policies within the education sector of the Champlain District that have either a positive or negative impact on childhood overweight and obesity. The scan will encompass policies impacting physical activity and diet and shall be conducted from both a school board and individual school perspective. Structured interviews will be conducted with representatives from the Ministry of Education and each of the 9 boards across the Champlain District. A web-based survey of all schools within Champlain District will be conducted to examine local policy implementation and barriers. Findings from the local scan will be compared with best and promising practices provincially, nationally, and internationally to inform recommendations for action. The scan will result in a report that identifies strengths and areas for improvements in the area of school-based healthy weights policies.

c) Priority Setting

Champlain Healthy School-aged Children Summit

A summit will be held in summer 2007 with representatives from key stakeholder groups from across the Champlain District. The summit will be used to generate a commitment to a set of regional goals and targets that will form the basis of our multi-sectoral action plan to address obesity in children and youth. The summit will serve to complement the next phase of program implementation.

d) Action Plan Development & Implementation

Social Marketing Campaign

Based on information from the attitudinal research study, a social marketing campaign will be developed to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills for active living and healthy eating among families with school-aged children.

School Policy & Environments

A district-wide task force will create and implement region-wide school policies targeting daily physical activity (both curriculum-based and after school) and healthy eating (cafeterias, vending machines, school lunches).

Family & School-based Programming

A team will be mobilized to support schools across the Champlain District in the development of school-based action plans to “support healthy eating and active living everyday in every student”.

Leadership, Education & Training Program

A regional training program will be implemented to support skills training in daily physical activity and healthy eating for policy makers, principals, teachers, and peer leaders across the Champlain District.

Performance Management Plan

A regional report card will be used to track implementation activities, and behavioural and physical measures will be tracked in a representative cohort of schools and children/youth from the Champlain District.

Performance Indicators

- Number of schools with healthy school policy for cafeterias
- Number of schools with healthy school policy for vending machines
- Number of schools with daily physical activity programs
- Prevalence of children who are physically active (daily for 30 minutes)
- Prevalence of children with screen time hours > 3 per day
- Prevalence of children consuming > 5 fruits and vegetables per day
- Prevalence of children consuming fast foods more than 2/week
- Prevalence of overweight in school-aged children
- Prevalence of obesity in school-aged children

Partners

- Eastern Ontario Health Unit
- City of Ottawa Public Health Unit
- Leeds, Grenville & Lanark District Health Unit
- Renfrew County & District Health Unit
- Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario
- University of Ottawa Heart Institute
- Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario
- Champlain Local Health Integration Network