



TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Dr. Alexander Summers, Medical Officer of Health
Emily Williams, Chief Executive Officer

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SUPPORTING STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT OF A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD IN SCHOOLS

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive Report No. 52-22, re: "Supporting Students' Development of a Positive Relationship with Food in Schools" for information.

Key Points

- Evidence indicates that traditional healthy eating messages and practices in schools can cause harm by potentially triggering disordered eating behaviours, adversely impacting diet quality.
- Providing neutral food exposures, messages, and experiences in schools promotes eating competence and a positive relationship with food, as well as supports food acceptance over time.
- The Child Health and Young Adult teams' registered dietitians are leading a shift in the approach to food education to promote life-long positive relationships with food and body image among students in Middlesex-London. This approach is culturally sensitive, developmentally appropriate, protective against eating disorders/disordered eating, and promotes overall health and wellbeing.
- References for this report are located in [Appendix A](#).

Background

It is well documented that children and youth do not eat the recommended servings of vegetables and fruit per day (Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, 2009; Roblin, Smith, Loxley, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2019). Several diet-related non-communicable diseases, including cancer, heart disease, and stroke, are among the leading causes of death in Canada, making food and nutrition a significant public health and economic concern (Prowse et al., 2020). Dietary attitudes and behaviours are shaped during childhood and adolescence and are tracked into adulthood (Langford et al., 2014; Murimi et al., 2018; Ontario, 2018). Thus, supporting children and youth to foster a positive relationship with food can have lifelong health promoting impacts. Schools have been identified as an important and effective setting for health promotion strategies targeted for children and youth (Langford et al., 2014; Wolfenden et al., 2017).

Traditional Healthy Eating Approach

Traditional healthy eating messages promoted in schools by public health and educators include teaching children and youth about the healthfulness of food and placing food into categories based on nutrition quality (e.g., labeling foods as good and bad foods). Evidence now demonstrates that this approach may not have been effective in improving diet quality or promoting positive eating habits (DeCosta et al., 2017; Frerichs, Intolubbe-Chmil, & Trowbridge, 2016; Larkin & Rice, 2005; Langellotto & Gupta, 2012; Maher et al., 2017; Welch & Leahy, 2018). Rather, research has linked the development of eating disorders to healthy eating and healthy weight messaging received in school (Chen & Couturier, 2019; Pinhas et al., 2013).

Well-intended messages about “healthy eating” can inadvertently cause harm by leading to preoccupation and fear of food (Lytle et al., 1997; O’Dea, 2000; Pinhas et al., 2013). This knowledge cannot be ignored, especially since hospitalizations for eating disorders, disordered eating behaviours, weight preoccupation and weight-based discrimination have reportedly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2022; Pearl & Schulte, 2021; Zipfel, Schmidt, & Giel, 2022).

School-based Approaches to Healthy Eating in Schools: Why Change is Needed

Children and youth make food decisions based on taste, preference, and familiarity. Research indicates that learning about the health benefits of eating certain foods is not likely to impact food decisions (Cooke, 2007; Frerichs, Intolubbe-Chmil, & Trowbridge, 2016). Food education in schools can be delivered in a way that is protective against disordered eating behaviours and supports the development of health promoting eating habits and a positive relationship with food in the long-term (Welch & Leahy, 2018). To achieve this, food education should focus on neutral food exploration and food literacy (Cunningham-Sabo & Lohse, 2014; DeCosta et al., 2017; Welch & Leahy, 2018).

Teaching about food in a neutral manner involves helping students to view all foods as morally equal, removing judgment, shame, labels, and fear around food and eating, as well as supporting the development of eating competence (Dietitians4Teachers, 2021; Satter, 2016). A food-neutral approach entails being curious about and exploring food using the five senses and refers to food by name rather than assigning labels such as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘junk’, or ‘healthy’ (Dietitians4Teachers, 2021). Labeling food, particularly with children under 12 years of age, can lead to worry about eating and fear of food (O’Dea, 2000; Lytle 1997). Eating competence is defined as being positive, comfortable, and flexible with eating. Individuals who are competent eaters reliably feed themselves enough enjoyable and nourishing food to feel satisfied (Satter, 2022). Eating competence involves being interested in and open to trying new foods, taking time to eat regularly throughout the day, and listening to hunger and fullness cues (Satter, 2022). Evidence states that competent eaters have higher quality diets, strong food resource management skills, and enhanced health and wellness indicators (Satter, 2022).

Next Steps

The Child Health and Young Adult teams’ registered dietitians are working in partnership with Southwestern Public Health on adapting and creating curriculum resources that align with this recommended evidence-based approach to food education in schools. This approach promotes food exploration and strives to foster a positive relationship with food among students in a way that is culturally sensitive, meaningful, and health promoting. The goal of this approach is to support students’ food acceptance and positive eating behaviours in the long term (Healthy Schools BC, 2022). To achieve this, the registered dietitians will:

- Review and update internal nutrition resources and messages to ensure alignment with this approach. Discontinue use of programs and resources that do not align with this approach.
- Enhance promotion of existing internal programming and resources that align with this approach, including food literacy programming (Let’s Get Cookin’).
- Develop new resources to support educators and staff as appropriate, including input from educators whenever possible.
- Develop and facilitate training for Health Unit staff working in schools on this approach and commit to ensuring new staff are oriented to this approach.
- Work closely with school partners to increase awareness about the evidence linking traditional healthy eating educational approaches to eating disorders and disordered eating.

- Promote the discontinuation by school boards and school partners of curriculum, programs and resources that do not align with the new approach.
- Explore external training opportunities for educators and community stakeholders.
- Fulfill a leadership role in advocating to school staff, community partners, public health professionals, and relevant provincial organizations on this approach to food education.
- Share this approach with other Health Unit teams for consideration to ensure consistent messaging.

References for this report are located in [Appendix A](#).

This report was prepared by the School Health Team, Healthy Living Division.



Alexander Summers, MD, MPH, CCFP, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health



Emily Williams, BScN, RN, MBA, CHE
Chief Executive Officer