

ACTIVATING AURORA: Daily Physical Activity in Schools

By Ron Weese

With all the controversy about sex-education curriculum, daily physical activity (DPA) requirements for children in elementary schools has had little attention. It deserves more.

Currently in our elementary schools in Ontario, DPA is 20 minutes per day. However, in 1988, Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada launched the term "Quality Daily Physical Education" (QDPE) as a way to define a program that is "well-planned, taught by qualified and enthusiastic professionals and offers a variety of learning opportunities to all students on a daily basis throughout the entire school year."

PHE Canada identified minimum standards required for a school QDPE program and this included 30 minutes per day. According to the Canadian Sport for Life Society, 60 minutes per day is recommended for healthy outcomes in children. That activity has to be vigorous; at an intensity that results in an increased heart and respiratory rate.

In the last 15 years, the literature is replete with evidence of the decline in physical activity and the negative health consequences of sedentary lifestyles. But what has been done in our schools? Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada) documented many of the problems. In a 2000 study, only 57% of the cases showed the recommended time being spent on physical education.

Only 20% of parents indicated their child received daily physical education and 10% reported none at all! And when physical education became optional in secondary schools, enrollment declined further and more markedly in females than males.

More recently, less than half of the schools in Canada reported that policies were in place to ensure that specialists in physical education were providing quality opportunities and in elementary schools this number was even lower.

Elementary "generalist" teachers also cited lack of preparation and expertise as a major barrier for them to achieve curriculum outcomes in physical education.

And what about facilities and equipment? According to PHE Canada studies cited, Canada ranked near the bottom with respect to the adequacy of facilities for physical education programs. In 87% of Canadian cases, the equipment and facilities were rated as being inadequate. Only Latin American (100%), African (93%) and Asian (93%) countries reported higher levels of inadequate facilities than Canada. And Cameron et al in 2007, showed that only 40% of schools reported they had fully implemented policies to provide adequate physical activity equipment for students. And 30% of schools reported no policy related to funding for physical activity equipment.

What about Aurora? Activate Aurora has been working with both our local School Boards who are members of the Mayor's Task Force on Physical Activity. The commitment for change in our school Community is palpable. "Activate Aurora Schools" are coming on stream gradually and as they do, these schools receive the resources they need to help teachers deliver quality physical literacy and activity in their classrooms each day.

They receive training through mentorship during school time, much of it voluntary. They receive equipment and lesson guidelines that will build fundamental movement skills in each child. The goal is to ensure schools and teachers are properly resourced to do the important job of delivering high-quality physical activity in classes every day.

I am encouraged by the response from principals, teachers and parents who all want to help re-build healthy active schools.

Parents must help. Talking to your children about their DPA experiences in school and supporting the teachers as they develop your child's skills and motivation to be active is an important step. Encouraging kids to be active using the skills they learn in school is important. DPA has homework. It is called "play" and we need more of it; particularly after school when children are most vulnerable for inactivity. Ask your kids what they learned in DPA and have them show you. You might even want to join in!

I also encourage parents to ask about becoming an Activate Aurora School. We are there to help build healthy, active school cultures with our partners; Public Health, who assist in building Healthy School Plans; Healthy Kids Community Challenge who work in a variety of ways through the Ministry of Health; Parent Councils who help individual school communities thrive and of course, teachers and principals who deliver healthy, active messages each day.

For more information on our Activate Aurora Schools Program, contact us and Join Now! at www.activateaurora.com.