



School Health Promotion in Alberta

Alberta in Profile¹

Alberta's land and freshwater covers close to 662,000 square kilometers, the 6th largest area of Canada's provinces and territories. Located in between British Columbia (to the West), Saskatchewan (to the East), the Northwest Territories (to the North) and the US state of Montana (to the South), Alberta is the largest of the three Prairie Provinces. Over half of the population lives in the two largest cities of Edmonton (the capital) and Calgary.

The population of Alberta was estimated to be almost 3.6 million in 2009. The main language spoken is English, although many other languages are spoken because of Alberta's multinational population. One in 7 Albertans was born outside Canada and one in 10 is a member of a visible minority. Known as the 'energy province', the oil industry plays a large role in its prosperity and Alberta has had a strong economy for many years.

In the 2008/2009 school year, there were over 596,000 students from kindergarten through grade 12 in 1,427 public, 355 separate, 34 Francophone, 19 charter schools, and 256 private schools or Early Childhood Services (ECS) programs. Alberta's 2,091 schools are governed by a total of 297 school authorities, of which 63 are public, separate and Francophone school boards. The remainder are Charter, private schools or ECS private authorities.

Public, separate and charter schools are required to establish school councils to foster parent and community involvement in education. Though additional members may be appointed, each school council must include the following members: school principal, teacher(s), parents of students enrolled in the school, and student(s) (high schools only). Parents must form the majority of members. Through school councils, Albertans may advise the principal and the school board respecting any matter relating to the school.

As part of implementing the government's plan for improving the health care system, Alberta Health Services became officially operational on April 1, 2009, with the proclamation of the Health Governance Transition Act. The one provincial board incorporates the nine previous regional health authorities, the Alberta Mental Health Board, the Alberta Cancer Board and the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission.

The new board for Alberta Health Services governs all health services in the province, working in partnership with Alberta Health and Wellness to ensure all Albertans have equal access to health services across the province. The Alberta Health Services Board reports directly to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Alberta Health and Wellness continues to be responsible for:

¹ Sources: Statistics Canada, *Land and Freshwater Area, by Province and Territory*; Government of Alberta, *Alberta Facts* at http://www.gov.ab.ca/home/about_alberta.cfm, http://albertaindc.ca/default.asp?V_ITEM_ID=85 and linked sites; Alberta Education, *Statistics* at <http://education.alberta.ca/apps/statistics/numberofschools.asp>; Alberta Health and Wellness, *Health Programs and Services* at <http://www.health.alberta.ca/health-services.html>



- Setting, monitoring and enforcing provincial health policy;
- Standards and programs; and
- Managing health capital planning, procurement and outcome measures.

The changes do not alter the way Albertans access health services. People continue to receive health programs and services in their communities as they always have.

School Health Promotion

Following up on a commitment to make children's health a top priority, the government of Alberta initiated *Healthy Kids Alberta!* (HKA) in January 2006. *Healthy Kids Alberta!* A wellness framework (2007-2017) for Alberta's children and youth was developed as a cross-ministry initiative and approved in June 2007. The strategy calls for a determinants of health perspective to support the efforts of parents, families, and communities to be well, make healthy choices, and create environments that support those choices.

It is widely held that the school is an important setting for health promotion: children's health status affects their ability to learn, and conversely, educational attainment is a determining factor in the health of students. The **Healthy Alberta School Communities (HASC), Strategic Plan** a joint initiative of Alberta Education and Alberta Health and Wellness was approved in June 2007 to provide provincial leadership in encouraging and facilitating the creation of healthy school communities. A comprehensive, multifaceted approach has been used to support the development and implementation of health promotion strategies that enhance the wellness of school-aged children and youth. A School Health and Wellness Manager position is jointly funded to lead the development and implementation of the HASC Strategic Plan and represent Alberta on the School Health Coordinator committee of the Joint Consortium for School Health.

Implementation

In September 2006, Healthy Weights initiatives were launched by the Minister of Health and Wellness to promote the health of children and youth. In 2009 these included:

- **Health Promotion Coordinators for Healthy Weights** is managed by Alberta Health Services to work in collaboration with school communities to support healthy eating and active living initiatives for children and youth.
- **Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children Youth** was released and distributed in 2008 to assist organizations and facilities (childcare, school and recreation settings) to offer healthy food choices for children and youth.
- **Alberta Healthy School Community Wellness Fund** is managed by the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta in partnership with the Alberta Coalition for Healthy School Communities and Alberta Health and Wellness. Since 2006, the Wellness Fund has supported projects that promote healthy school communities and improve the health and wellness of school-aged children and youth. As of December 2009, 70 projects have received funding in the amounts of \$5,000 to \$50,000/year to a maximum of three years to promote



healthy eating, physical activity and positive social environments that support children and youth in making healthy choices.

In September 2009, Alberta Education announced the new *Framework for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Wellness Education*, which is available online at <http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/program/pe.aspx> (English) and <http://education.alberta.ca/francais/teachers/progres/core/edphys.aspx> (French).

The *Framework for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Wellness Education* (The Framework) outlines the fundamental concepts and inherent values of wellness education and provides guidance for the future development and implementation of K–12 wellness education programs of study in Alberta.

The Framework responds to the growing concern for the health of children and youth in today's society and the implications for the significant role that curriculum can play in improving student learning and health outcomes.

The Framework examines:

- improved learning and wellness outcomes for Alberta students;
- the vision of wellness education in Alberta; and
- the role of a comprehensive school health approach to support and maintain a culture of wellness in school communities.

Wellness education nurtures the whole child and enhances students capacity for achieving their full potential – intellectually, physically, socially, spiritually and emotionally. The new wellness education program will introduce a holistic approach to student wellness that incorporates the needs and priorities of Alberta students living and learning in the 21st century, and provide a continuum of wellness education from kindergarten to grade 12.

The *Framework for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Wellness Education* reinforces the Ministry's commitment to enhancing the health and learning outcomes of all students and supports government ministries, schools, families and communities in working collaboratively to create and maintain a culture of wellness in school communities in Alberta.

Alberta Education is committed to helping students develop positive daily physical activity habits and recognizes the contribution of teachers, schools and school authorities in implementing the **Daily Physical Activity** (DPA) initiative. In September 2005, Alberta schools offering grades 1 – 9 programs began implementing 30 minutes of daily physical activity to increase student physical activity levels. Already, this initiative has shown positive results and is expected to continue to make a notable contribution to the health and well-being of our students and to all citizens of our province. Further information on the DPA policy is available at <http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/resources/dpa.aspx>.

In addition to programs and initiatives already mentioned, regional and school level implementation is supported by:

- **Healthy U.** Healthy U is a website designed to support and encourage Albertans to lead healthier lifestyles. The website provides access to current, reliable, evidence-based information on healthy eating and active living.
- **Ever Active Schools.** (EAS). Supported administratively by the Health and Physical Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association, EAS is a provincial program funded by three ministries: Alberta Health and Wellness, Alberta Education and Tourism, Parks and Recreation. The program enhances the physical education and health curricula and provides a framework for school communities to identify and implement strategies for fostering social and physical environments that support healthy active lifestyles. EAS provides learning events and planning resources to implement and monitor comprehensive school health practices, policies and environments in Alberta schools.

Evaluation and Assessment

Alberta Education introduced Daily Physical Activity in 2005 and conducted a two-part evaluation to determine its effectiveness. Part 1 of the evaluation was conducted as an over-sampling of a national study. It shows that 86% of Alberta children and youth are not active enough to meet guidelines of 16,500 steps daily promoted by the Public Health Agency of Canada.

In 2007, an online survey of teachers and principals was completed in order to gain a greater understanding of the impact of Daily Physical Activity in grade 1 – 9 schools and to provide feedback on promising practices and implementation challenges. The full report and executive summary is available at <http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/resources/dpa.aspx>.

The executive summary is also available in French at

<http://education.alberta.ca/francais/teachers/progres/core/edphys/appui/apq.aspx>.

In 2008, the **Raising Healthy Eating Active Living Kids Alberta (REAL Kids Alberta)** evaluation, a joint project of the School of Public Health of the University of Alberta and Alberta Health and Wellness was used to collect baseline data on a total of 3,935 grade five students and 4,209 parents from 174 mostly randomly selected schools from across Alberta. The intent of this evaluation is to assess the impact the Alberta Health and Wellness Healthy Weights Initiatives and to provide some measure of health outcomes for children in Alberta.

The evaluation involves surveying grade five students, their parents, and the school principals to assess student and school health. The students are also weighed and measured, with the results remaining confidential. According to the baseline data from 2008, grade 5 students need ongoing opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity in healthy environments.

Summary of Results 2008:

- The majority of grade five students are not meeting Canada's Food Guide recommendations; in particular, only 27% of students are consuming enough fruits and vegetables;



- Only 26% of students report being sufficiently physically active;
- 47% of students spend three or more hours per day in front of a screen outside of school;
- Among grade five students in Alberta, 29% were overweight or obese in 2008, which is substantially higher than estimates from an earlier study in 2004; and
- Parent responses indicated strong support for a school environment that promotes healthy eating (90%) and daily physical activity (95%).

All of the randomly selected schools have received a report that summarized the 2008 REAL Kids Alberta results for each school. In addition, each of the school districts also received a district-specific report. The reports are often used to inform policy and practice in the school community. Some schools have used this information to support the planning of school environments, selection of programs, or applying for grants.

In the spring of 2009, thirty schools in the Edmonton area participated in a focused REAL Kids Alberta Pedometer Study. In this additional evaluation, the Grade 5 students completed surveys and recorded their physical activity using highly accurate, time-stamped digital pedometers. Participating students wore the pedometers for one week and received their printed results at the end of that week. The pedometer study schools have recently received their school reports, which indicated that students continue to have lower than expected activity levels, although some schools have made concerted efforts to improve activity and nutrition, with improving results for students.

The Raising healthy Eating Active Living (REAL) Kids Alberta evaluation is set to begin its second round of data collection between March and May 2010, with grade 5 students in select schools across the province. Following the upcoming 2010 edition of the survey, the participating schools and districts will receive a comparison report, which will show results from both 2008 and 2010. The results of the REAL Kids Alberta evaluation will be helpful for schools, districts, and the Province in planning and implementing school health programs.

Challenges and Successes

An Environmental Scan completed in 2007 by the Alberta Coalition for Healthy School Communities (ACHSC) showed that 67% of school authorities did not have authority-wide healthy eating policy or guidelines. Similar percentages report no authority-wide policy or guidelines for physical activity or mental well-being. The report highlighted the need for more work to be done to get health promotion policies, programs, and partnerships in all schools. The full report is available at http://www.achsc.org/our_initiatives.htm.

Noteworthy successes that have occurred since the Environmental Scan was completed include:

- The involvement of multi-sectoral partners in the Cross ministry initiatives: Healthy Kids Alberta! Strategy and Healthy Alberta School Communities Strategic Plan.
- Provincial directions for school health including the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth released in 2008, and the *Framework for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Wellness Education* announced in 2009.



- The Healthy Weights initiatives funded by Alberta Health and Wellness to support education and awareness, capacity building, and incentives to facilitate the development of school district policies that support the implementation of healthy eating and physical activity as outlined in the provincial directions.

Benefits to JCSH Membership

The knowledge exchange generated at the School Health Coordinator meetings of JCSH is difficult to replicate through other venues and contacts. The benefits to membership in the JCSH include:

- Timely access to the knowledge and experiences of other jurisdictions as wellness curriculum and healthy school policies are implemented across Canada;
- Enhanced knowledge exchange and sharing of resources that benefit the implementation of the Healthy Alberta School Communities Plan and provide valuable input to the target areas of healthy eating, physical activity and positive social environments; and
- Facilitated knowledge translation to support cross-ministerial partnerships and the health and physical literacy of students in Alberta school communities.

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