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ENDORSEMENT OF THE CALL TO ACTION: CREATING A HEALTHY SCHOOL NUTRITION ENVIRONMENT

The Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee recommends that:

- 1. The presentation by Rita Foscarini- Manager, Nutrition Services and Cathy Jaynes – Manager School Services regarding Comprehensive School Health be received**
- 2. That recommendations contained in the following report, May 11, 2004, from the Commissioner of Health Services be adopted.**

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee and Regional Council receive and endorse the *Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment*, Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health, March 2004 (see *Attachment 1*).
2. The Premier of Ontario and the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care be informed of The Regional Municipality of York's endorsement of the *Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment*.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is for Regional Council to receive and endorse the *Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment (Call to Action)*, produced by the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH), School Nutrition Workgroup, March 2004. The *Call to Action* calls on stakeholders to recognize the health and educational benefits of healthy eating and the importance of making it a priority in every school.

3. BACKGROUND

Nutrition is important to people of all ages, but it is particularly important to the well-being of children and adolescents. Well-nourished children and adolescents are more likely to be better prepared to learn, be active, and maintain their health as adults. Today, many in these age groups have unhealthy eating patterns. Inadequate nutrition can have a detrimental effect on children's learning ability, as well as on their physical development. Poor eating habits are contributing to the rising rate of childhood and adolescent overweight, obesity and type 2 diabetes. Not only are these poor eating habits

in childhood a concern, it is likely that they will be transferred into adulthood and increase the risk of chronic diseases such as cancer and cardiovascular disease.

Currently in Ontario schools, there is an increasing availability of minimally nutritious foods and a declining quality of food brought from home. Inadequate time for lunch breaks, inappropriate scheduling of mealtimes and limited nutrition education may also occur. These trends have contributed to the findings that one out of three children is now considered either overweight or obese and, according to the American Diabetes Association, there are increasing rates in type 2 diabetes among children, which would have been uncommon in the past.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

Under the *Health Protection and Promotion Act, Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines* (Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Public Health Branch, 1997), boards of health are mandated to work with schools, school boards, school advisory councils, principals, teachers and parents to support healthy eating and healthy weights.

One year ago a group of Public Health Nutritionists came together to form the School Nutrition Workgroup within the OSNPPH, the official organization of registered dietitians working in the Ontario Public Health system. The workgroup's mission is "Advocating for comprehensive healthy eating environments in Ontario schools by planning, supporting and sharing nutrition initiatives to improve the nutritional health of students." Following an environmental scan, the workgroup decided to create a document for use by those working in public health. This project has gained momentum along the way and has resulted in the *Call to Action*.

Although parents and care-givers have a responsibility to provide healthy foods, sole responsibility cannot be placed on the home environment. Young people spend a large part of their day in school, yet many schools have not taken adequate responsibility to promote healthy eating behaviours. Vending machines, cafeterias, school tuck shops, "special food" days, and in-class celebrations offer children access to typically large portions of foods with minimum nutritional value. The school system can play a significant role in students' lives, not only academically, but also by promoting a healthy school environment. Schools must acknowledge their role in ensuring that students develop eating behaviours that will optimize their learning potential and reduce their risks of developing chronic diseases.

Many social, financial and academic pressures undermine the efforts of schools to provide foods with maximum nutritional value. While the curriculum teaches about *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*, unhealthy foods are sold to raise funds, fast foods are introduced into the school, and vending machines often contain beverages and foods with minimum nutritional value.

A school that embraces the concept of the *Call to Action* promotes and supports healthy eating for students through actions as well as words. It will provide students with the skills, social support, and environmental reinforcements needed to foster healthy eating behaviours among students.

The *Call to Action* includes nine recommendations based on the essential elements of a healthy school environment:

1. Development and adopt food and nutrition policies that create and support healthy eating environments in all Ontario schools.
2. Ensure that the formal curriculum is designed to provide adequate learning opportunities for students to develop knowledge, attitudes and skills for adopting healthy eating behaviours; and that teachers devote sufficient time to teaching all of the healthy eating expectations in the curriculum.
3. Encourage and support opportunities for teachers to be trained in nutrition education.
4. Ensure all foods available in the school setting are consistent with classroom teaching, reinforce healthy eating messages and are culturally acceptable.
5. Encourage and support school staff in promoting and modeling healthy eating behaviours while at school.
6. Educate parents and the wider community about nutrition, and involve them in activities that promote the practice of healthy eating.
7. Support the development and sustainability of school nourishment programs, including breakfast, lunch and snack programs.
8. Ensure a safe food environment where all students are comfortable and can enjoy eating.
9. Develop recommendations for scheduling nutrition breaks at appropriate times that allow students sufficient time to eat.

To support the recommendations and suggested course of action for provincial ministries, local school boards and local boards of health, the *Call to Action* addresses the importance of healthy eating in the school context and presents the link between nutritional health, learning and chronic disease in children and adolescents. The report recommends the implementation of mandatory school food standards that emphasize foods with maximum nutritional value in all Ontario schools.

The *Call to Action* challenges the provincial government, boards of education, school communities and public health to acknowledge and act on their roles in establishing an environment that is supportive of healthy eating in Ontario schools.

The *Call to Action* is supported by the following organizations: Canadian Cancer Society, Canadian Diabetes Association, Dietitians of Canada, Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition, Ontario Physical and Health Education Association, Ontario Public Health Association, and the Toronto Food Policy Council.

4.1 Relationship to Vision 2026

Implementation of the nine recommendations in the *Call to Action* would be consistent with a number of goal areas in York Region's Vision 2026 document including Quality

Communities for a Diverse Population (high quality of life, play and learn in healthy neighbourhoods, responding to children in need), Responding to the Needs of Our Residents (supporting access to safe and ample food, promoting wellness), and Engaged Communities and a Responsive Region (high standards for transparent policy making and strong partnerships).

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Regional Municipality of York is currently taking an active role in the education and policy development components directly related to the nine recommendations included in the *Call to Action*. The Public Health Branch has dedicated 1.0 FTE, with an approximate cost of \$77,500 (including mileage and supplies) to nutrition education in schools. These activities are being completed as part of the Chronic Disease Prevention program and are included in the 2004 Business Plan and Budget.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

With the successful implementation of the recommendations in the *Call to Action* by provincial ministries, school boards across York Region and boards of health, the health of all school-aged students will improve and be maintained, ensuring that they are ready to learn. The implementation of the recommendations will also guarantee that school nutrition environments support parents and teachers in their efforts to encourage students to establish healthy eating behaviours which they will be able to maintain throughout their lives. The result, in time, will be a decrease in the prevalence of childhood, adolescent and adult overweight, obesity and type 2 diabetes.

7. CONCLUSION

The *Call to Action* addresses the poor eating habits of Ontario children and adolescents. Since children and teenagers spend a significant amount of their time at school, the report calls on the broader school community to create healthier school nutrition environments and to promote lifelong healthy eating behaviours.

Creating a healthy school environment is multifaceted, and requires commitment from all stakeholders. The *Call to Action* encourages local school boards, boards of health and provincial government administrators to implement the food standards and recommendations in this report in order to address the nutritional health of children and youth.

This report seeks the endorsement from the Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee and Regional Council of the *Call to Action*. The OSNPPH has forwarded copies of the *Call to Action* to the York Region District School Board, the York Catholic

District School Board, the Provincial Minister of Health and Long-Term Care and the Provincial Minister of Education for their information and appropriate action.

The Regional Chair is requested to write a letter to the Premier of Ontario and the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care informing them of The Regional Municipality of York's endorsement of the *Call of Action* report.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(A copy of the attachment referred to in the foregoing was forwarded to each Member of Council with the June 3, 2004 Health and Emergency Medical Services Committee agenda and a copy thereof is on file in the Regional Clerk's Office)