
For Information

REPORT TITLE: School Health 2023-2024 Year in Review

FROM: Nancy Polsinelli, RD HBS Sc MPA, Commissioner of Health Services
Katherine Bingham, MD MSc CCFP(EM) FRCPC, Acting Medical Officer
of Health

OBJECTIVE

To provide Regional Council an update on Public Health’s School Health Program for the 2023/24 school year and highlight programming and emerging opportunities for the current 2024/25 school year.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- The School Health Program is mandated by the Ontario Public Health Standards to partner with local school boards and schools to promote health and prevent high risk behaviours that are adopted during the school years.
 - Partnership declarations with school boards and collaboration with other important stakeholders is fundamental to supporting the school community and students.
 - During the 2024/25 school year, the School Health Program will prioritize signing partnership declarations with all four public school boards in Peel.
 - Education partners have identified substance use by students (e.g., vaping, cannabis) and student mobile device use (including social media) as emerging issues. The School Health Program expanded vaping prevention programming in response to this need and plans are underway to provide support for mobile device use.
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DISCUSSION

1. Background

Schools are a priority setting for public health to promote and protect the health of students in Peel, as they present a unique opportunity to influence health early in the life course. The Ministry of Health’s *School Health Program Standard* within the *Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS)* outlines the expectations for boards of health to deliver publicly funded public health programs and services, including:

- Developing and implementing a program of public health interventions to improve the health of school-aged children and youth; and
- Offering support to school boards and schools to assist with the implementation of health-related curricula and health needs in schools.

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Peel Public Health's School Health Program partners with local school boards and schools to offer educational programming and initiatives that promote mental wellbeing, physical activity, and healthy eating, as well as prevent the adoption of high-risk behaviours such as substance use and vaping. The School Health Program utilizes the Ministry of Education's *Foundations for a Healthy School* framework to design and implement health programming for students and support education partners with advancing curricula and policy mandates.

2. School Health Program Partnerships

Partnerships are critical for healthy schools. They enable the School Health Program to support Peel's four public school boards and local schools to promote health and prevent high risk behaviours.

In 2018, Peel Public Health (PPH) signed a formal partnership declaration with the Peel District (PDSB) and Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Boards (DPCDSB) to work together to create healthy schools. Due to a lack of francophone Public Health Nurses (PHN) at the time, a signed agreement with the two public French school boards was not secured. However, following recent investments towards bilingual PHNs and an increase in support to the ten public French schools in Peel, the School Health Program is looking to establish and renew formal partnership declarations with all four Peel school boards for the 2024/25 school year. This written declaration between PPH and Peel school boards includes a pledge by school boards to dedicate resources to support joint strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs and initiatives.

Other important partnerships for the School Health Program include, but are not limited to:

- Various Peel Public Health programs (e.g., Routine School Immunization, Oral Health, and Tobacco Enforcement);
- Regional partners, such as Public Works, to promote active transportation to school; and
- External agencies to support safe transportation in school communities, the Student Nutrition Program, and student mental health program.

3. School Health Programming Update

For the 2022/23 school year, the School Health Program leveraged the partnership declaration with PDSB and DPCDSB to deliver two mental health promotion programs to improve student resiliency and support healthy schools. Playground Activity Leaders in Schools (PALS) was delivered in elementary schools and Youth Empowering Students for Mental Health (YES4MH) was offered to secondary schools. At the request of school boards and schools, the YES4MH program was extended to grades 6-8 the following school year. Grants were also offered to schools to promote mental wellbeing initiatives. Additional programs and resources offered to schools during the 2023/24 school year (see Appendix I for detailed descriptions) included:

- Healthy eating and student nutrition,
- Physical activity and active transportation to school,
- Grants to support active school spaces in hallways and playgrounds, and
- Vaping prevention education.

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4. Emerging Issues

The School Health Program hosts monthly meetings with superintendents and key staff members from the four public school boards to better understand local needs and emerging issues in schools. Two key current issues for school boards and schools are substance use (particularly vaping and cannabis) and student mobile device use, including the impacts of social media.

One in five Peel students in grades 7 to 12 report having smoked an e-cigarette at least once in their lifetime^[1] and one in four students in grades 9 to 12 “quite often” or “very often” neglected homework due to electronic devices^[2].

Provincial Approach

These local issues are reflected in the updated Ministry of Education, *Program and Policy Memorandum 128* (PPM 128), which came into effect September 1, 2024. Per PPM 128, school boards and schools are required to restrict student personal mobile device use and implement enforcement mechanisms for substances such as alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, and electronic cigarettes.

Public Health Approach

Given this growing concern, during the 2023/24 school year the School Health Program provided vaping prevention education to staff, students, and parents; including an unprecedented request to support five summer schools. Plans are underway to expand programming to address other substances (e.g., alcohol, cannabis, and tobacco) and to develop educational resources for student mobile device use.

5. Opportunities & Next Steps

During the 2024/25 school year, the School Health Program will prioritize:

- the signing of a partnership declaration with all four public school boards in Peel;
- working with internal and external partners to support school boards and schools with advancing policies that support student health, personal mobile device use, and substance use; and
- providing programs and services to students that promote healthy behaviours, prevent high risk behaviours, and address emerging issues.

[1] Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDHUS). 2019. Centre for Addictions and Mental Health. Peel Public Health.

[2] Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2019, Peel Public Health.

“The data used in this publication came from the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and administered by the Institute for Social Research, York University. Its contents and interpretation are solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the official view of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health”

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6. Conclusion

Peel Public Health's School Health Program prioritizes working with partners to develop and implement school-based programs to improve the health of students. While health issues and related priorities evolve from one school year to the next, schools remain a priority setting to influence key factors affecting student health. To reinforce a commitment to collaboration, the School Health Program will focus on a formal partnership declaration with all Peel school boards for the 2024/25 school year.

APPENDICES

Appendix I – Additional Programs and Resources Offered to Schools During the 2023/24 School Year



Nancy Polsinelli, RD HBSc MPA, Commissioner of Health Services

Authored By: Lee-Ann Kosziwka, Health Promoter