

Creating Protective Environments: Restricting Access to Unhealthy Foods around Schools

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Issue:

Preventing cancer and other chronic diseases requires more than simply promoting the benefits of making healthier choices in relation to food, tobacco, alcohol, and physical activity. The built environment can create significant barriers to making healthy choices within our communities (1). The Heart and Stroke Foundation defines the built environment as “the arrangement of activities or land uses within community settings and the physical connections between where we live, work, and play” (2). The way a community is planned and designed can impact risks for cancer and other chronic diseases (3).

In Alberta, convenience stores are part of the community landscape and many are located within walking distance to schools. They typically offer foods that are high-profit, but have little nutritional value (i.e. packaged foods including candy, chips, ice cream, frozen drinks, and pop) with relatively fewer fresh food options (4, 5). Purchases made in convenience stores can have a considerable impact on children’s consumption habits (6) and the total number of daily calories consumed by school children (7). Children and youth shop at convenience stores, and for little over a dollar, they can buy high calorie, unhealthy foods and beverages (7). This easy access to unhealthy foods may also undermine student purchasing patterns within Alberta school campuses (cafeterias, vending machines, hot lunch programs) that are currently under redevelopment to offer more healthy options (5, 8, 9).

Neighbourhoods surrounding community schools can influence what children eat and drink before, during, and after the school day. When convenience stores or fast food restaurants are located near schools, the consumption of junk foods (i.e. high-calorie, low-nutrition foods) increases (1, 6, 10). A 2014 study based in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan found higher amounts of unhealthy food sources in lower-income neighbourhoods (11). This study also found that unhealthy food sources tend to be closer to schools and places of residence in contrast to healthier sources (11). In addition, a 2012 international study showed that there was at least one fast food restaurant or convenience store within a one kilometre radius around half of the 320 Canadian schools studied (12). The study also found that the more venues that were located near the school, the more likely the students were to eat lunch outside of school (12).

In Canada, nearly a third of children and adolescents are classified as overweight or obese (13, 14). Obese children are more likely to become obese adults, with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, various types of cancer, type-2 diabetes, increased risk of disability, and premature death (15). In order to promote healthy weights and prevent obesity, prevention focused on children and youth is critical (16, 17). Currently, a number of healthy eating initiatives are underway within Alberta schools (18). However, to be effective, our efforts must also expand beyond the borders of a school and into the surrounding community (9). We can use policy to create protective physical environments for school-aged children in and around Alberta schools to facilitate healthy eating.

Local governments are well-positioned to influence and promote the health of citizens (19, 20). Zoning laws can be used by municipalities to create “healthy food zones” (21) by increasing the availability of affordable and nutritious food choices for consumers. Zoning restrictions to regulate the number of fast food outlets, drive-through services and formula restaurants in certain areas have been selectively passed around the United States (3, 22). These type of laws are often passed to protect the appeal of neighbourhoods, decrease traffic, and related hazards, or decrease business competition for small business owners (22). However, zoning restrictions can also protect student health by limiting the availability and accessibility of unhealthy foods and beverages in areas surrounding new school sites (12, 23). According to a 2014 survey administered to 1,200 people in Alberta, the majority of respondents (73%) would support zoning to restrict the supply of junk food near schools (24).

*As per the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth (ANGCY).

Benefits to Taking Action:

- Choosing healthy foods will become an “easy choice” for children. Healthy foods will be increasingly accessible both on campus and in the surrounding community. This increased access, combined with other policy and programming efforts already underway in schools, will enhance the return on these government investments and contribute to normalizing the purchase and consumption of healthy foods as part of the Alberta school experience (5).
- In Canada, the direct and indirect costs of obesity total between \$4.6 and \$7.1 billion respectively (25), meanwhile the costs of obesity in Alberta alone are estimated to total over \$1.27 billion (26, 27). Restricting access to unhealthy foods around Alberta schools can contribute to preventing obesity, reducing chronic disease, and related costs to taxpayers.
- Engaging locally owned convenience stores and other businesses to promote healthy foods by increasing availability, enhancing visibility, and offering price incentives in areas surrounding schools could be a win-win situation for business, families, and public health stakeholders.
 - Incentive programs can support current small food store owners near schools to provide and promote healthier food items through interventions such as: grants or loans to purchase equipment to store fruits, vegetables and fat-free/low-fat dairy; providing subsidized publicity; establishing a recognition program; researching and making links to healthy food wholesale distributors (4, 20, 21, 28).
 - Most parents want to provide healthy foods for their children. Families will now have more options for providing healthy foods for their children for school lunches and may expand their household purchasing patterns to be more inclusive of local businesses. This could expand the consumer base and profits for local businesses.
 - Local businesses can also increase business by voluntarily taking action to support healthy eating. For example, in 2010, Booster Juice took action to align their products to meet BC school nutritional guidelines as well as the ANGCY to ensure their products can be offered to Alberta students on campus (29). This type of action can facilitate healthy eating off-campus when healthy quick-service restaurants are located in close proximity to schools.

Considerations:

Promoting healthy eating by making decisions about where restaurants and other food stores are allowed to locate may not be a role previously considered by municipalities. Although some cities in the United States have zoning laws to regulate the location of fast food restaurants in designated areas (22, 30), planning law in Canada restricts communities from taking this action against specific food retailers on the basis that it is discriminatory (31). However, when Canadian planners were recently surveyed, they noted that future land use and planning decisions could be influenced by actions that inform local government officials about this issue (31).

Commercial development is generally viewed by local governments as positive activity. However, the health impact of the businesses and products recruited may not be critically considered. Efforts to engage local government must include opportunities to increase the capacity of those managing and producing the built environment to better understand the complex health implications for citizens (31).

Local businesses need to be actively supported to define and identify healthy products. It is not enough to provide copies of nutritional guidelines to owners and expect action. We need to create a supportive environment to ensure that businesses have resources to offer and promote healthy foods.

APCCP Priorities for Action:

- Support municipal zoning restrictions that limit the proximity of fast food outlets and convenience stores in areas with new schools.
- Support businesses in areas around schools to promote foods consistent with Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth (ANGCY).
- Promote the adoption of the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth (ANGCY) in recreation facilities, which are frequently located near schools.

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