Issue:
Creating healthy food environments for all Albertans is a significant challenge across the province. Many young Albertans do not have consistent access to healthy food and many of the settings where children spend their time offer foods that are energy-dense and nutrient poor (1-3). As a result, nearly three-quarters of children and youth do not eat the recommended number of fruits and vegetables each day (4) and are consuming large amounts of processed foods, high in calories, sugar and saturated fats. This, in turn, impairs energy levels, memory, learning, and academic performance (5), and increases the risk of developing chronic conditions and diseases moving into adulthood (6, 7). Poor eating habits developed in youth may also persist into adulthood (8).

Ensuring that all Alberta children have access to healthy food requires a comprehensive approach. Public institutions, such as schools, can play an important role in such an approach by creating environments that support healthy eating habits among young people (9, 10). Not only do young people spend a significant amount of time in the school setting, but schools have the potential to reach the diversity of the child and youth population across Alberta (11). To date, many Alberta schools have implemented policies, programs and initiatives aimed at improving healthy eating in the school setting. However, these activities are often ad-hoc, voluntary in nature, and lack sustainable funding (12). As a result, the effectiveness of such activities varies and does not benefit all students in Alberta.

To help ensure all students across Alberta benefit from a healthy food environment, the Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention (APCCP) supports progress on school-based recommendations from Alberta’s 2018 Nutrition Report Card on Food Environments for Children and Youth (3). Produced annually by researchers at the University of Alberta School of Public Health, the report card is an assessment of how Alberta’s current food environment and nutrition policies support or create barriers to improving children’s eating behaviours and body weights. For 2018, Alberta received a C+ for the following indicators related to schools: 1) high availability of healthy food in school settings and 2) subsided fruit and vegetable subscription programs in schools (3).

To improve the school food environment across Alberta, key recommendations include:
- Support the implementation of mandatory rather than voluntary school nutrition policies
- Commit sustainable government funding to fruit and vegetable subscription programs across Alberta and designate funding to increase reach across Alberta
- Foster relationships between schools and local food producers, and consider the development of local food procurement policies when feasible
- Monitor school food policies and foods offered on an annual basis

Benefits to Taking Action:
- The World Health Organization has identified schools as an important setting for global action to promote public health (9). The World Health Organization’s 2017 Report of the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity recommends that settings such as schools work to create healthy food environments as part of a comprehensive approach to improve young people’s intake of healthy food and reduce their intake of unhealthy foods (9).
- School nutrition policies aimed at increasing the availability of healthy food and decreasing the availability of unhealthy food can have a positive impact on students’ food choices and preferences, diet quality, and nutrition knowledge, particularly when part of multi-component initiatives involving additional strategies such as education, food provision, and parent involvement (13-17). Fruit and vegetable subscription programs have also been found to have a positive impact on children’s fruit and vegetable intake, and have illustrated effectiveness among socio-economically disadvantaged populations (13, 18).
- Providing access to healthy food in school settings through meal and snack programs may support student performance at school. Research suggests that school breakfast programs can have a positive impact on student learning outcomes (19, 20) and that diet quality impacts academic performance (5, 20, 21).

- Increasing the proportion of locally grown food available in school settings has the potential to create new markets for farmers (22) and reduce the environmental impact of food production (23, 24). It may also help to reduce the distance food travels from where it is produced to where it is consumed (22). Connecting schools to local food through initiatives like Farm to School may have a number of positive benefits, such as improving fruit and vegetable consumption, increasing knowledge about food, growing, and agriculture, and building community connections with local producers (25, 26).

- Monitoring and evaluation of school food policies and initiatives in Alberta is essential to gauge implementation of provincial strategies for healthy diets and their impacts (3).

Considerations:

- From an equity perspective, school nutrition policies and programs should be developed with enough flexibility to allow for tailoring to the school culture and community (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status) (18, 27). Meal and snack programs should also be made universally available to all students at the school level to prevent stigma that can arise from targeting participation based on socio-economic status (28).

- To encourage effectiveness, school nutrition policies and programs should be implemented as part of comprehensive and multi-component initiatives (10, 18). School principals and superintendents play a key role in championing and facilitating the adoption of such initiatives (29-31). Initiatives should also appropriately engage community partners, particularly when working with schools that serve First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities in Alberta (32, 33).

- In 2016/2017, the Government of Alberta implemented the School Nutrition Program, which aims to provide participating schools with a daily nutritious meal that follows the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth. In its first year, the province piloted the program in 14 school authorities with an initial investment of $3.5 million and a reach of over 5000 students. In 2018/2019, the program was expanded to all 62 public, separate and francophone school authorities with a $15.5 million investment and an estimated reach of over 30,000 students (3). While this increase in reach is significant, many of the province’s almost 73,000 students from K-12 (2018/2019) are still not benefiting (34).

- There is strong evidence that fruit and vegetable subscription programs are an effective strategy for improving student dietary intake (15). With this in mind, the Government of Alberta should consider modifying and expanding on the School Nutrition Program to offer a free fruit and vegetable subscription program. Not only would this provide an opportunity to reach a broader range of students from K-12, it could also create linkages to Alberta agriculture and local producers across the province (25).

- Policies and programming should be implemented consistently for at least one year to produce sustainable changes (17). Repetition in food provision and education reinforces behaviour changes and knowledge acquisition for students. Parents can also play a role in modeling healthy eating behaviours and promoting nutritious foods to reinforce concepts for their children (17).

- There is public and policy-influencer support for action to promote healthy school food environments in Alberta. According to a 2017 survey administered to 1,200 people in Alberta, the majority of respondents support mandating policies for healthy food and beverages at schools (90%). Further, a 2017 survey of policy-influencers indicates that 87% support providing fruit and vegetable subscription programs at schools, 77% support mandating policies for healthy food and beverages at schools, and 80% support monitoring and evaluating school food and beverage initiatives (35).

- Cost is a barrier to the implementation of healthy food environments in schools. To fund school nutrition policies and programs, the Government of Alberta is encouraged to implement a levy on sugary drinks in the province. Sugary drinks offer no nutritional benefit and their consumption is linked to serious health risks (36). Considering this, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Dietitians of Canada, and the Canadian Senate recommend a tax on sugary drinks (2,
Research indicates that a 20% tax on sugary drinks in Alberta would generate $174.6 million in revenue annually, and would result in $1.3 billion in health care savings over the next 25 years (39). A tax on sugary drinks would also reduce consumption of these drinks, resulting in an additional health benefit (39-43).

- Investing in prevention makes economic sense. Research indicates that a $1 investment in health promotion interventions can result in $14 cost savings (44).

**APCCP Priorities for Action:**

- Advocate for the implementation of mandatory rather than voluntary student nutrition policies, as well as enhanced monitoring of school food policies
- Advocate for sustainable government funding for fruit and vegetable subscription programs and designate funding to increase reach across Alberta
- Encourage the development of local food procurement policies and programs in schools when feasible
References:


