



# Building Health & Physical Literacy for Schools & Communities across Ontario

*How Ontario's Revised H&PE Curriculum Can Foster the Well-being of a Generation*

In Ontario, 2.1 million children and youth are about to adopt a new way of looking at health and physical education, as are their teachers and communities. With the release of the Ministry of Education's revised elementary Health and Physical Education (H&PE) Curriculum on January 18th, 2010, Ontario educators teaching grades 1 – 8 will soon find it easier than ever to adopt a broader, more balanced approach to health and physical Education; students will experience a program that is more engaging, energizing, and personally enriching than ever before. The elementary curriculum must be implemented by fall 2010, and the secondary curriculum will be released later in 2010. Perhaps most importantly, the effects of this program are likely to change not only the health-related behaviours and attitudes of students, but those of their families and communities as well.

"(The revised curriculum) stands to be the most significant health promotion initiative the province has ever seen," says Chris Markham, executive director and CEO of Ophea, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting healthy schools and communities through quality program supports, partnerships, and advocacy.

## **A curriculum with a vision of building physical and health literacy**

What is so ground-breaking about the revised curriculum? One factor is its focus on building literacy. Teachers across all grades and subject areas understand the importance of fostering literacy in children when it comes to reading and

writing, but the idea of physical literacy (the ability to move with competence in a variety of physical activities) and health literacy (the skills needed to get, understand, and use information to make good decisions for health) are newer concepts. And, luckily for Ontario's educators and students, they are both concepts which the revised H&PE curriculum clearly defines and fully supports.

Far from viewing H&PE class solely as a forum for playing team sports and teaching didactic health lessons, both the revised elementary curriculum and secondary curriculum (set to be released later this year) are based on the vision that the knowledge and skills acquired in the program will benefit students

*Ophea is a not-for-profit organization led by the vision that all kids value, participate in, and make a lifelong commitment to healthy active living. Ophea works in partnership with school boards, public health, government, non-government organizations, and private sector organizations to develop groundbreaking programs and services that support healthy active schools and communities.*

throughout their lives and help them to thrive in an ever-changing world. By helping students acquire physical and health literacy, the curriculum not only ensures that they participate effectively in the sport or activity at hand, it also helps them to develop the comprehension, capacity, and commitment needed to lead healthy, active lives and to promote the benefits of healthy, active living to others.

## **A holistic, community-based approach**

The revised curriculum also presents exciting opportunities for engaging community partners and views each school as a potential hub for a healthier community.

"The revised curriculum is best implemented as one of the four pillars of Healthy Schools," explains Heather Gardner, Ophea's H&PE curriculum



consultant, referring to the Ontario Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health Promotion's resource entitled, *Foundations for a Healthy School*. This resource provides a philosophy and framework for healthy schools in Ontario in the following four areas:

1. High quality instruction and programs;
2. A healthy physical environment;
3. A supportive social environment, and;
4. Community partnerships.

The curriculum obviously relates most directly to the first pillar (high quality instruction and programs), but, comments Gardner, "its vision cannot be fully achieved unless it is delivered within a healthy school and healthy community."

### **Making living skills a priority**

Perhaps one of the most exciting program changes is the strong emphasis now placed on living skills (i.e., personal skills, interpersonal skills, and critical and creative processes). These skills, which include communication, self monitoring, decision making and goal setting, are so essential to a student's ongoing well-being and personal success, both inside and outside the classroom, that they are infused into all areas of the revised H&PE curriculum and are addressed across all strands.

### **Developed in partnership with key stakeholders**

The revised curriculum was developed by the Ministry of Education with input from many education and health promotion organizations, including Ophea, the Ontario Association for the Supervision of Physical and Health Education (OAS-PHE), and others. It underwent an extensive review, consultation, writing, and revision process which began in 2007. This process involved feedback from many professional organizations, as well as teachers, students, and other stakeholders. Together, these groups and individuals examined the 1998 curriculum, preserved the best parts of it, and made recommendations for change.



### **A fresh approach and a renewed focus**

The revised H&PE curriculum is made up of three distinct but related strands:

1. Healthy Living
2. Active Living
3. Movement Competence: skills, concepts and strategies.

The approach to Healthy Living has changed in the revised curriculum, and is not about just teaching facts and information. The new Healthy Living strand focuses on helping students use their understanding of health concepts to make healthy choices and to understand the connection between their personal health and well-being and that of others and of the world around them. The Active Living strand (formerly called the Active Participation strand) focuses on teaching students about the joy of physical activity while developing personal fitness and responsibility for safe participation in physical activity. And, finally, the Movement Competence strand (formerly called the Fundamental Movement Skills strand) focuses on developing movement skills, concepts,

and strategies that prepare students to participate in lifelong physical activity.

Specific updates have also been made to the content in order to reflect current health topics (e.g., healthy eating, personal safety and injury prevention, substance use, addictions and related behaviours, and human development and sexual health). Mental health and emotional well-being are addressed across all topic areas and the curriculum as a whole is based on more of a continuum, helping students to build on the skills they have acquired as they move through the elementary grades and on to secondary education. To help achieve this continuum, topics have been shifted between grades and levels to improve developmental appropriateness and to ensure that students have the opportunity to learn and practice skills before they are required to apply them. The revised curriculum's healthy living framework is flexible, allowing for emphasis on topics of greater priority with different student populations or in different regions across the province, and to allow for the integration of future health priorities. It also integrates Daily Physical Activity



(DPA), a policy mandated in 2005 which requires all elementary school students to undergo a minimum of 20 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day during instructional time.

The shifts in approach described above are also reflected in the five fundamental principles on which the curriculum is based.

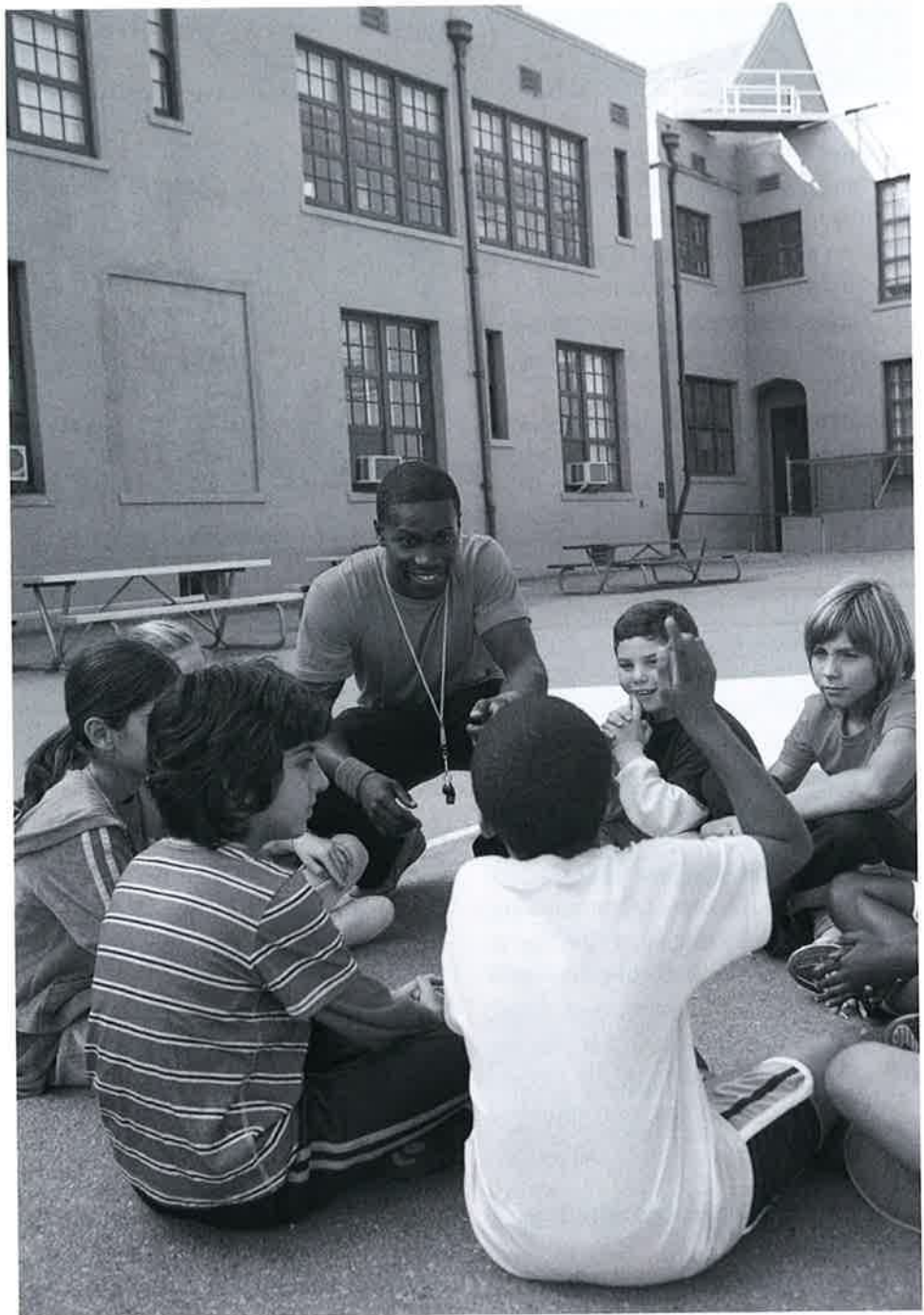
**1. Health and physical education programs are most effective when school staff, families, and communities support the students' learning.**

In other words, the revised H&PE program is best implemented within the context of a healthy school. Not only does involving community partners – such as sport and recreation organizations, public health, and local businesses – help to validate and reinforce what students are learning in H&PE classes, it has the potential to improve the health of entire communities.

And while the healthy schools approach may take a concerted, consistent effort on the part of all school community members, the payoffs are well worth it. When children see the values and healthy habits they are learning at school reflected in school policies, at home, and out in their communities, these experiences become more than lessons – they become a way of life.

**2. Physical activity is the key vehicle for student learning.**

This principle refers to the well-supported fact that students learn about healthy activities best by doing them. Based on the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model, the premise stresses the use of tactical problems and solutions that can be applied to a variety of games. As they learn by doing, students come not only to understand what they need to know to be successful in a particular game or sport, but, more importantly, they learn to use critical and creative thinking skills to make decisions. It is an



approach that not only creates better and more knowledgeable game players, but also motivates active participation and encourages fun.

**3. Physical and emotional safety is a precondition for effective learning in health and physical education.**

This principle relates once again to the Healthy Schools framework (i.e., the need for a supportive social environment). It recognizes that children partici-

pating in H&PE are taking part in activities that involve inherent risk and that they are doing so in a space where their peers can see them explore, succeed, and make mistakes. For this reason, a focus on safety and inclusivity is essential and the program aims to accommodate the strengths, needs, and interests of all students.

**4. Learning in health and physical education is student-centred and skill-based.**



The revised curriculum recognizes that the physical and emotional development of students will vary widely. For this reason, the curriculum has shifted from a content-focused approach to a skill-based approach which allows for differentiation of instruction. Teachers are guided through examples and teaching prompts to modify lessons according to a student's readiness, interest, and learning preference in order to help them reach their full potential.

The curriculum has also been developed in such a way that students of all backgrounds and abilities (including First Nations, Métis and Inuit students; students from a variety of cultures; students who are learning English, and students with special needs), should find the program accessible, and should be able to see themselves reflected in its content.

**5. Learning in health and physical education is balanced, integrated, and connected to real life.**

Learning in the revised H&PE curriculum is balanced in that it addresses physical, cognitive, and social needs. It is integrated because connections between all strands of the curriculum – Healthy Living, Active Living, and Movement Competence: Skills, Concepts and Strategies – and between the content of the strands and Living Skills are made whenever possible. And, finally, the topics covered reflect the situations students face and the choices they must make in today's world.

**Implementation will take teamwork**

Effective implementation of the revised curriculum is a shared responsibility requiring collaboration between educators, administrators, public health, sport and recreation, provincial government, and non-government organizations.

As they begin to use the new curriculum, educators will find this support, both from community partners (including

***“It’s about helping kids learn to make healthy choices.”***

public health, sport and recreation, and other community leaders with whom they will collaborate in order to implement the curriculum), as well as from organizations like Ophea who have comprehensive support resources at-the-ready.

“In my objective opinion, the Ophea H&PE support documents are the most valuable resource to which I have ever had access,” says Andrea Pivetta, a primary/junior teacher from York Region District School Board. She is referring to the “Ophea binders” which have been helping teachers to deliver the 1998 H&PE curriculum for the last 10 years.

Ophea has been working in partnership with OASPHE and various other partners including school boards, public health units, sport and recreation organizations across the province, as well as provincial government and non-government organizations to develop new Ophea H&PE Curriculum Support Resources (Grade 1–8), which are set to be released in fall 2010 to coincide with the mandatory implementation of the revised elementary curriculum. Ophea has engaged 46 writers, over 100 partners who are reviewing areas relevant to their areas of expertise, and over 200 educators who are pilot testing the resources across the province in this development process.

Like the “Ophea binders” which came before them, these resources will help teachers make a smooth transition to the revised curriculum and will provide a one-stop-shop for all educators, particularly generalist teachers, to access high quality, grade-specific support. The resources will encompass all strands of the revised curriculum and will include approximately 120 lesson plans for each grade level.

**A curriculum with the potential to create a healthier Ontario...**

If effectively and consistently implemented within a healthy schools framework, Ontario's revised H&PE curriculum stands not only to change the way Ontario students look at H&PE classes, but also the way entire communities look at health – and not just because the curriculum's structure and content encourages partnerships between schools and community partners.

When schools are able to help students become physically and health literate, they are, in essence, handing them a key to a lifetime of increased well-being. Not only do these students acquire a love of physical activity and a wealth of transferable movement skills, they also learn to apply these skills in a variety of settings. Likewise, when a student comes to understand the connections between the living skills they are learning and what they are experiencing on a day-to-day basis, real changes in their outlook begin to take place. Suddenly, what is learned inside H&PE classes has the potential to encourage healthy active living outside school walls, with effects that last well beyond the school-age years.

As one health promotion specialist put it quite simply: “It’s about helping kids learn to make healthy choices.” While today's students are busy growing into the adults who will build the communities of tomorrow, that is perhaps the most valuable thing we can teach them.

**The revised elementary Health and Physical Education Curriculum Grades 1-8 is available online at [www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health.html](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health.html).**

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