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# STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

## HEALTHY SCHOOLS STRATEGY

(Section 4.03, 2015 Annual Report of the  
Office of the Auditor General of Ontario)

2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament  
65 Elizabeth II



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The Honourable Dave Levac, MPP  
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly

Sir,

Your Standing Committee on Public Accounts has the honour to present its Report and commends it to the House.

Ernie Hardeman, MPP  
Chair of the Committee

Queen's Park  
October 2016



# STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

## MEMBERSHIP LIST

2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 41<sup>st</sup> Parliament

ERNIE HARDEMAN  
Chair

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Vice-Chair

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PERCY HATFIELD

\*MONTE KWINTER

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PETER MILCZYN

JULIA MUNRO

\*ARTHUR POTTS

\*CHRIS BALLARD and LOU RINALDI were replaced by MONTE KWINTER and ARTHUR POTTS on September 13, 2016.

LISA GRETZKY regularly served as a substitute member of the Committee.

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VALERIE QUIOC LIM  
Clerk of the Committee

ERICA SIMMONS  
Research Officer



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## **PREAMBLE**

On May 4, 2016 the Standing Committee on Public Accounts held public hearings on the audit of the Healthy Schools Strategy administered by the Ministry of Education (Section 4.03 of the Auditor General's 2015 *Annual Report*).

The Committee endorses the Auditor's findings and recommendations, and presents its own findings, views, and recommendations in this report. The Committee requests that the Ministry provide the Clerk of the Committee with written responses to the recommendations within 120 calendar days of the tabling of this report with the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, unless otherwise specified.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Committee extends its appreciation to officials from the Ministry of Education and from the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, the Trillium Lakelands District School Board, and the York Catholic District School Board. The Committee also acknowledges the assistance provided during the hearings and report-writing deliberations by the Office of the Auditor General, the Clerk of the Committee, and staff in the Legislative Research Service.

## **BACKGROUND**

The increasing incidence of overweight children in Canada has become a significant public health concern. Nearly one in three students is overweight and approximately 12% are considered obese—almost twice as many as in the late 1970s.

In 2012 the Ontario government set a goal of reducing childhood obesity by 20% in five years. The Ministry of Education (the Ministry) established the Healthy Schools Strategy (the Strategy) to help support student learning and growth through proper nutrition and daily physical activity.

Ontario's 72 publicly-funded school boards operate 4,900 elementary and secondary schools with a total enrolment of approximately two million students. At the time of the 2015 follow-up audit, the Ministry reported spending about \$7.8 million over the three fiscal years from 2012-13 to 2014-15 on activities in connection with the Strategy.

## **2013 Audit Objectives and Scope**

The objective of the original 2013 audit was to assess whether the Ministry and selected school boards had adequate procedures in place to

- implement policies and initiatives designed to help improve health and academic achievement for Ontario's students through better eating habits and increased physical activity; and

- ensure the identification of good practices, oversight of schools, and the measurement and reporting of results.<sup>1</sup>

The audit work was conducted at the Ministry's Healthy Schools and Student Well-Being Unit (which has primary responsibility for the Strategy) as well as at three school boards and selected elementary and secondary schools within these boards. The auditors also spoke with representatives of a number of other ministries and organizations, including the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Public Health Ontario, the Healthy Kids Panel, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, local public health units, and the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health.

### **Summary of the 2013 Audit**

Significant findings from the 2013 audit included the following:

- Neither the Ministry nor the school boards visited by the Auditor had an effective strategy for monitoring whether food and beverages sold in schools comply with the Ministry's School Food and Beverage Policy nutrition standards.
- The Ministry and school boards visited had limited data to assess whether the School Food and Beverage Policy contributed to better student eating behaviors.
- The Auditor reported that neither the Ministry, nor the three school boards, nor the schools visited had a formal strategy for monitoring whether students in grades 1 to 8 get the 20 minutes of daily physical activity during instruction time that the Ministry's curriculum requires.
- The Ministry requires students to complete only one credit course in health and physical education during their four years of secondary school—much lower than requirements for secondary students in some other Canadian jurisdictions.
- The Ministry and school boards need to better integrate their activities with other ministries and organizations, and leverage their resources and expertise.

### **2015 Follow-up Audit**

At the time of the 2015 follow-up audit, the Auditor found that little or no progress had been made on most of the Auditor's recommended actions, and few were in the process of being implemented. The Auditor observed some "noteworthy efforts" but noted that, on the whole, more effort is needed to implement the recommendations of the 2013 audit.

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the Auditor General, "Healthy Schools Strategy," Sec. 3.03, *2013 Annual Report*, pp. 104-05.

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## ISSUES RAISED IN THE AUDIT AND BEFORE THE COMMITTEE

Significant issues were raised in the audit and before the Committee. The Committee considers the issues below to be of particular importance.

Ministry staff emphasized that they take the Auditor's recommendations very seriously. The Ministry is consulting with healthy schools stakeholder groups and school boards to review and improve both the School Food and Beverage Policy and the Daily Physical Activity Policy. Ministry staff explained that the work of sister ministries is also critical to the success of the Healthy Schools Strategy—in particular, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's Healthy Kids Strategy; the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport's after-school program; and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services' student nutrition program. With regard to the School Food and Beverage Policy, Ministry staff noted the importance of giving students a voice and some choice in what foods are available in their schools.

The Committee asked about the challenges involved in implementing the Healthy Schools Strategy and how schools are responding to the Auditor's recommendation that communication between schools and parents should be improved. Ministry staff noted implementation challenges with both the Daily Physical Activity Policy and the School Food and Beverage Policy. School board staff explained that the Strategy involves changing the behavior and attitudes of teachers and other education staff as well as of students and families. The boards are using social media as well as sending out printed information such as parents' guides, fact sheets, and tip sheets in an effort to ensure that the goals of the Strategy are communicated to parents and families.

The Committee stressed the importance of student mental health. Ministry staff described a number of initiatives addressing mental health and addictions including the recently-announced Well-Being Strategy for Education. Together with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the Ministry of Education is bringing together seven directors of education and seven medical officers of health to develop strategies to strengthen the relationships between public health units and school boards. The Ministry has also placed mental health leaders in every school board.

One school board director, noting the Auditor's recommendation that boards should develop effective strategies for monitoring compliance with the School Food and Beverage Policy, described his board's efforts to develop a tool for assessing compliance, first in all of the board's secondary schools, and then in elementary schools. With regard to the Auditor's Daily Physical Activity recommendations, the board is offering job-embedded and after-school training as part of the new teacher induction program. The board's parent involvement committee is providing advice on how best to communicate information about the Strategy to parents.

The Daily Physical Activity Policy, requiring school boards to ensure that all students in grades 1 to 8 have a minimum of 20 minutes of sustained moderate to vigorous physical activity as part of the instructional time during the school day, came into effect in 2006. There was a discussion of the challenges involved in fitting this time into an already-crowded daily curriculum. At the secondary

school level, Ministry staff explained they have focused on creating more opportunities for students to be involved in physical activities, and encouraging participation in sports. Culinary skills courses are very popular with students, and provide opportunities to both learn about and produce healthy meals.

A school board director described how the board has established a healthy schools advisory committee for the school board district, as well as a healthy living consultant and a healthy schools lead in every school in the board to help share best practices and provide professional development for school staff. The board has also dramatically increased its partnerships with health units, nutrition coordinators, and outdoor education providers, as well as with organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs, and children's foundations.

There was a discussion of the role that primary and secondary school students play in educating their parents and families about healthy schools goals, just as students who learn about environmentalism at school often take the lead in persuading their families to be more environmentally conscious.

The Committee asked about accountability for the targeted funding provided specifically to increase school-based activities related to the Strategy. The Ministry has hired an education consultant to evaluate whether the pilot projects developed with these grants are helping school boards to better meet the objectives of the Strategy.

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## **COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Standing Committee on Public Accounts recommends that:

- 1. The Ministry of Education and school boards should improve communication with parents to encourage healthier eating and increased physical activity, and assess the effectiveness of this communication.**
- 2. The Ministry of Education should work with school boards to**
  - a) ensure that school administrators and teachers receive sufficient training to implement the School Food and Beverage Policy and promote healthy eating;**
  - b) develop consistent and effective strategies for monitoring compliance with the School Food and Beverage Policy; and**
  - c) develop measurable objectives for healthy eating and measure progress in achieving these objectives.**
- 3. The Ministry of Education should work with school boards to**
  - a) ensure that elementary school administrators and teachers receive sufficient training on how to incorporate daily physical activity into the school day; and**
  - b) establish a way to measure and monitor whether students are provided with the required daily physical activity.**
- 4. The Ministry of Education should**
  - a) assess options (including best practices in other jurisdictions) for increasing physical activity levels for both elementary and secondary school students; and**
  - b) set goals and targets for boards to increase physical activity in schools, and periodically monitor, measure, and publicly report on the progress made.**