

**Proposal to the School Environment Against Youth Disengagement
from Physical Activity Presented by the Director of Public Health**



Under the *Act Respecting Health Services and Social Services* (R.S.Q., chapter S-4.2), the Director of Public Health is responsible of, "[...] informing the population [...] on the principal risk factors and the actions he considers the most effective [...] and seeing to it that the measures necessary for the protection of the population's health are taken [...]". This is how the public health directors, together, decided on focusing the attention of the school network's decision makers on the possible impact of some of their decisions regarding the immediate and future health of our youth, against the ongoing trend towards a sedentary lifestyle, a known risk for many chronic diseases.

This proposal supports the document entitled *L'activité physique, déterminant de la santé des jeunes, Avis du Comité scientifique de Kino-Québec*¹, in which the following is recommended:

All children and teenagers must be physically active every day or almost every day. They should also participate in average or higher intensity physical activities at least three times a week for at least 20 minutes each time.

This document mainly intends to draw attention on the school network's essential contribution to the rectification of the situation and the fight against youth physical inactivity. Some components of the education reform (the new health and physical education class and the implementation of school based child care) and the *Sommet du Québec et de la jeunesse* (the expected school's opening onto its own environment) can be perceived as opportunities or threats in the sense that these components could be instrumental in improving or deteriorating the situation.

It is recognised that one of the school community's responsibilities is to offer a healthy environment and to implement the optimum conditions necessary to the accomplishment of its educational mission towards responsible citizenship. Because of school's importance in the child's daily schedule, the quality of the school's environment has a major impact on the child's participation in physical activities and his immediate and future health.

The school should establish conditions or carry out measures to provide every child with the opportunity to be active on every school day.

activité physique
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Why Call on the School Environment?

The School, an Important Life Environment

Family, school, neighbourhood, municipal recreation, sports associations and the community are all environments where children can live determining experiences, particularly with regards to sports. After the family environment, the school environment is where the child spends the most time. The school relies on quality human and material resources in order to accomplish its mission: teach, qualify and socialise. It promotes the acquisition of basic motor skills as well as a healthy lifestyle for all children. However, the number of opportunities for physical activity in school has significantly dropped over the past years. The school environment can respond to this situation².

The school must represent a conducive and unconditional environment for physical activity.

The School Environment Has Much to Gain

To organise an active schoolyard seems to reduce violent behaviour and facilitate interventions for the supervisory staff^{3,4}.

Moreover, taking part in a daily physical education class, even at the expense of the time allocated to French and math teaching, enables children to obtain equally good grades and to improve their listening ability^{5,6}.

Finally, the participation of children in a school sports team seems to enable the development of a greater sense of belonging to their school⁷.

Physical activity: a good way to "socialise in order to learn to better live together" in school.

A Very Serious Situation:

Increasingly Sedentary Youth

Youth disengagement from physical activity

School-aged children are not as active nowadays as they were before. In their teenage years, they enter into a disengagement process from physical activity, a process which will continue until adulthood.

The reasons behind this disengagement are closely related to the loss of enjoyment from physical activity and to the development of new interests.

Physical Activity: Health Benefit

Regular physical activity through childhood and adolescence is linked to the following benefits:

- Improved physical condition;
- Better weight control;
- Higher bone density;
- Better cholesterol and blood pressure control;
- Greater self-esteem.

The most recent surveys indicate that one out of two children does not meet the criteria of the International Consensus on Physical Activity During Adolescence.

Youth must be provided with opportunities to be physically active in a pleasant atmosphere.

Making it a Habit, That's What Counts

Regular physical activity through childhood and adolescence is linked to the development and maintenance of a physically active lifestyle. Conversely, a sedentary or not very active lifestyle during childhood and adolescence will make it more difficult to adopt this behaviour in adulthood. We know that the learning of motor skills is much easier during childhood and adolescence. Therefore, the actual situation seems worrying to say the least.

Sedentarity: A Health Risk

A sedentary lifestyle is linked to the occurrence of risk factors (overweight and obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol level, lower bone density) which will foster, in adulthood, the development of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus (adult-onset diabetes), osteoporosis and colon cancer⁸.

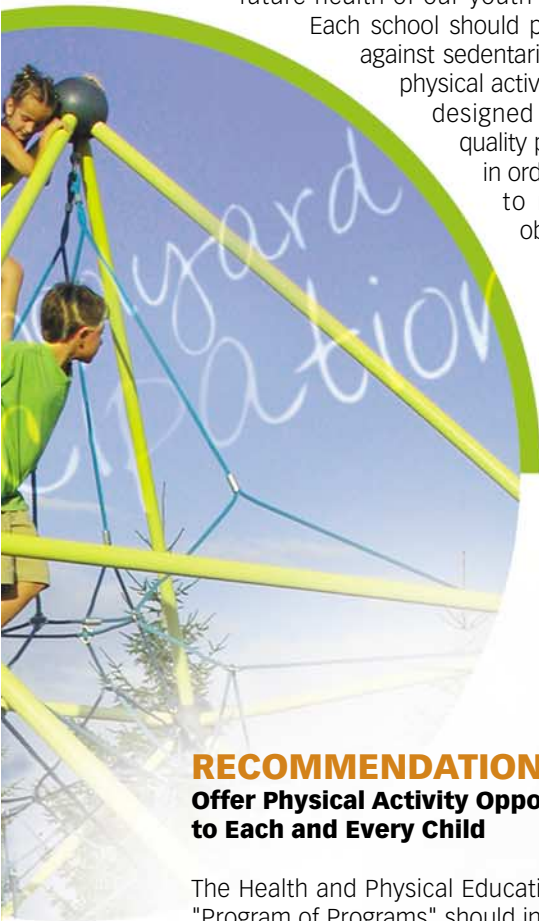
An Active School:

Recommendations and Measures

The fight against sedentary must be an issue for the whole community, but here, we are especially calling on the school environment. Physical activity can contribute to reaching the school's objectives, particularly that of socialising to learn to better live together. The benefits of physical activity for the immediate and future health of our youth are also recognised.

Each school should participate in the fight against sedentary by committing to a physical activity promotion process designed to establish a daily quality physical activity period in order to allow every child to meet the following objectives:

- To have opportunities to be physically active;
- To develop their qualities, skills and abilities with regards to physical activity and health;
- To acquire the attitudes and behaviours necessary to the development of a physically active lifestyle.



RECOMMENDATION 1

Offer Physical Activity Opportunities to Each and Every Child

The Health and Physical Education curriculum or the "Program of Programs" should include a daily physical activity period emphasising on the enjoyment and the development of motor skills. For example:

The physical education class and recess period are the only physical activity opportunities that reach each and every child.

- Allocating as much time as possible to the health and physical education class so that all children can acquire the necessary skills and abilities to engage in physical activities;
- Structure recess periods in order to allow elementary school students to transfer these skills so that they acquire the necessary attitudes and behaviours to engage in physical activities;
- Promote the development of physical educators and teachers with regards to the development of the necessary attitudes and behaviours to engage in physical activities.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Organise Extracurricular Activities

The school environment should encourage the development of coaching structures at all levels, be it in a recreational or competitive background. For example:

- Broaden the range of recreational activities offered during lunch time and after school hours;
- Offer training and support to young leaders so that they take on the responsibility of organising and conducting certain physical activities;
- Implement a committee that would have the mandate of finding ideas which could improve the school's level of activities;
- Encourage a greater participation from parents in the organisation of activities.

It is often during extracurricular activities or in the schoolyard that we can see if the students master certain skills acquired through their training.



RECOMMENDATION 3

Promote Equipment Optimal Use

The school environment should further discuss with the municipalities and associations in order to maximise the potential of existing sporting equipment and to ensure that future investments take into account the students evolutionary interests. For example:

- Open the school and its facilities after school hours and on non-school days, developing agreements with the municipality, community centres and sports organisations;
- Promoting after-school transportation so that a greater number of children can participate to extracurricular activities;
- Make arrangements with school based child care in order to encourage equipment optimal use.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Contribute to the Development of Active and Safe Transportation

Urge students and parents to walk, bike, roller-skate or take a scooter to school when safe paths are available. For example:

- Build a partnership with the municipal environment in order to provide children with safer and more active transportation to school.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Promote Physical Activity

Encourage students, parents and school staff to engage in physical activities. For example:

- Take advantage of the various communication vehicles available to encourage students and the school team to be active and to show that physical activity integration in one's lifestyle is an important value to the school;
- Promote the use of physical activity themes by all teachers.

conclusion

The school should take advantage of all available opportunities to promote physical activity. It should first choose the physical activity opportunities that reach each and every child such as the health and physical education class and recess periods. Optional activities such as extracurricular activities and active transportation can enable the school to perfect its service offer, the ultimate objective being to offer all children "a healthy and active school".

1. Kino-Québec, 2000. L'activité physique, déterminant de la santé des jeunes, Avis du comité scientifique de Kino-Québec, *Secrétariat au loisir et au sport, Ministère de la santé et des services sociaux, Gouvernement du Québec*, p. 21.
2. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES and U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION. Promoting Better Health for Young People Through Physical Activity and Sports: A Report to the President From the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Education. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, 2000, p. 11.
3. *Ministère de l'Éducation*. Prévenir et contrer la violence à l'école. Québec, *Gouvernement du Québec*, 1993, p. 51.
4. CHEVALIER, S ET BEAUDET, N. Évaluation du projet École St-Enfant Jésus. *Direction de santé publique Montréal-Centre*, June 1997, p. 23.
5. DWYER, T. & al. An investigation of the effects of daily physical activity on the health of primary school students in South Australia. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 1983, vol. 12, p. 308 to 313.
6. SHEPHARD, R.J. Curricular physical activity and academic performance. *Pediatric Exercise Science*, 1997, vol. 9, p. 113 to 126.
7. OUELLET, N. Le sport à l'école : ... une réussite ! *Association régionale du sport étudiant de Québec*, 1995, p. 39.
8. Kino-Québec, 2000. Op.cit. p. 19.



