

**Ministry of Education Working Group on the Elementary Curriculum
Supporting Learning and Teaching in Ontario's Elementary Schools:
Discussion Paper for a Province Wide Consultation**

Ophea's Response

The Ministry of Education, in consultation with the Curriculum Council, appointed a working group to examine the elementary curriculum in general and to respond in particular to concerns that the curriculum is "overcrowded". Educators and stakeholder groups were invited to provide input on this issue by completing an online survey. Following is Ophea's response to the survey and discussion paper:

1. Based on your experience as an educator:

a. Do you think the elementary curriculum is "overcrowded"?

Yes

b. Please explain what "overcrowded" means to you.

The Ontario elementary curriculum is indeed "crowded" with many priorities and issues that schools are expected to address. Ontario elementary schools are challenged not only with ensuring students fulfill curriculum expectations in a broad spectrum of subject areas but also with addressing a myriad of other key societal issues, many of which are beyond the scope of the curriculum policies. The *Discussion Paper* identifies and emphasizes several learning priorities – all of which are competing for limited time during the school day.

Many boards' policies indicate that the 300 instructional minutes of an elementary school day shall be allocated as follows:

- 100-120 minutes of literacy
- 60 minutes of numeracy
- 40 minutes of French
- 20 minutes Daily Physical Activity
- Leaving 60-80 minutes in each school day to cover all other curricula, including Science and Technology, The Arts, Social Studies and Health & Physical Education (H&PE)

Although the Ministry does not mandate all of these "minutes" (excluding French and DPA), student achievement is emphasized as a priority through the Ministry's strategic goals (Energizing Ontario Education) and key initiatives that emphasize literacy and numeracy such as the LNS, EQAO testing, and the School Information Finder on the Ministry of Education website.

Given the sheer volume of expectations and learning priorities, both curricular and non-curricular, these board-driven time allocations reduce flexibility for educators to fully address curriculum expectations, which results in these priorities competing with one another for time and consideration.

2.

a. Referring to the themes listed in the box on this page, please identify, in order of priority, the three themes that you think need to be focused on to a greater degree in the elementary curriculum.

1. Healthy choices and active living

2. Critical literacy
3. Character education/citizenship education/social skills

b. Why are these your top choices?

These three priorities encompass the skills and abilities that children and youth need to develop in order to succeed in school and throughout their lives. Research in educational improvement and health promotion shows that interventions to support healthy student choices, active living and learning are most effective when implemented within the context of a comprehensive school health (Healthy Schools) approach. Research also demonstrates the link between health and learning (www.activehealthykids.ca – 2009 Report Card).

The revised Health and Physical Education (H&PE) curriculum (to be released in Fall 2009) - given its emphasis on living skills which are not covered in any other subject area - along with other recently established policies (e.g. Daily Physical Activity {DPA}, *Foundations for a Healthy School*, Poverty Strategy, After-School Strategy, Safe Schools Strategy, Roots of Violence, Environmental Education) present an opportunity to address several of the learning priorities identified in the *Supporting Learning and Teaching in Ontario's Elementary Schools Discussion Paper*. The revised H&PE curriculum has the potential to positively impact health and learning outcomes for Ontario's children and youth and to ensure all children reach their full potential.

c. What would you add to the themes listed in the box? Why?

- Physical and health literacy (or broaden the definition of literacy in the education system to reflect UNESCO's interpretation of the term – “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society”)
- Personal skills (e.g. Self-awareness and self-monitoring skills, adaptive management and coping skills)
- Interpersonal skills (e.g. Communication and relationship skills)

It is essential that students acquire these skills to be successful in school and throughout their lives. The education system and the public must broaden their scope of what it means for schools to be successful beyond achievement in literacy and numeracy and push for accountability to meet the requirements of all subject areas and to ensure a safe, healthy and caring learning environment for all. In aligning policies and the learning priorities so that they are compatible with UNESCO's definition of literacy we could address the development of the whole child and in doing so enable all children and youth to reach their full potential.

Personal and interpersonal skills are the foundation for the development of all of the other learning priorities; without them, students will be unable to function as contributing members of their schools and communities now and in the future. These skills are addressed within the Living Skills identified in the revised H&PE curriculum but it is imperative that they be implemented and taught in an integrated manner in the context of the broader school and community environment along with the other learning priorities identified in the *Discussion Paper*.

d. Of the themes listed, which one(s) call for the most support for implementation?

Educators need support in delivering strategies that will enhance healthy choices and

active living, which include many of the priorities identified in the discussion paper. There is already a great deal of support for clearly identified priorities such as literacy and numeracy. It is the priorities which are beyond the scope of many of the curriculum policies (e.g. Character education/citizenship education/social skills, critical and creative thinking skills, personal and interpersonal skills, equity/diversity/inclusiveness, etc.) that need the most implementation support. These priorities and skills have the potential to be addressed with the implementation of the revised H&PE curriculum. Given that, according to the 2009 People for Education Report, approximately only 40% of elementary schools have a specialist H&PE teacher, the responsibility for implementation of the revised H&PE curriculum rests with generalist teachers (many of whom have limited knowledge or experience in the subject area) it is imperative that proper implementation support for H&PE be established.

Many individuals and organizations share responsibility to address the learning priorities outlined in the *Discussion Paper*. They include: students, families, teachers, principals, school board administrators, public health professionals, sport and recreation providers, community and provincial organizations, businesses, and governments. Cross-sectoral partnerships between various sectors and government ministries are needed at a provincial, regional and local level in order to ensure integrated and holistic approaches that will enable all children and youth to reach their full potential.

Educators also need support and training to effectively integrate the learning priorities into all areas of the curriculum and into the broader school environment. A more balanced approach, where the learning priorities are infused throughout all of the subject areas, would help educators to meet the requirements of all subject areas and to ensure a safe, healthy and caring learning environment where students are empowered to grow into caring, healthy, responsible global citizens.

3. In your opinion, how could the curriculum be made more engaging for all students (e.g., relevance of material, balance of topics, meeting students' needs)?

Ontario has a world-class curriculum. To ensure that the curriculum remains current and relevant for students, curriculum development takes into consideration a number of "lenses" (e.g., curriculum coherence, special education, aboriginal perspectives, anti-discrimination, assessment and evaluation, environmental education standards, English Language Learners). Quite simply, the curriculum has been designed to ensure it engages and is relevant to all students. The problem is not related to curriculum design but rather to curriculum delivery.

Generalist teachers are the norm in elementary schools, and they may lack the experience and knowledge to address the expectations of all subject areas in an engaging manner. Board policies that emphasize literacy and numeracy are taking precedence over the implementation of curricular subject areas. The "school day" is not as engaging as it can be for all students in part because no such lenses have been applied to literacy and numeracy. Thus, the focus of implementation support should be on key learning in the subject areas and on implementing the learning priorities identified in the *Discussion Paper*. The practice of embedding literacy and numeracy into all subject areas (i.e. Think Literacy) is the opposite of what is happening now (as educators are currently trying to integrate subject areas into the literacy and numeracy blocks). This will bring more diversity and variety to the teaching of literacy and numeracy and will thus be more engaging.

Policies such as DPA, which add to student engagement by breaking up the day and supporting attention and focus (particularly for boys), offer the opportunity for integration

not just in the areas of literacy and numeracy but in other curricular areas such as science and the arts. Learning becomes more relevant in many subject areas when delivered in the context of a comprehensive school health (Healthy Schools) environment.

4. How might more flexibility be built into the curriculum so that teachers can tailor delivery of the curriculum to the needs of their students and thereby help to improve student learning?

Ensuring that the curriculum is flexible is important to meeting the needs of students, but in order to have a significant impact on student learning it is crucial that full-fledged integration be built into the system. In order for this to happen, school boards must be more flexible in their approach to mandating instruction time in various areas, and educators need to receive high quality, consistent implementation support not only for curriculum but for the myriad of key societal issues which are beyond the scope of the curriculum documents. Boards must also ensure that alignment of key policies and priorities occurs and that educators are provided with direction and examples of how to address the learning priorities using an integrated, holistic approach.

In creating implementation supports integration must be a key consideration as well. Implementation supports that cover expectations from more than one subject area will allow educators to address more of the learning priorities and thereby ensure integrated and holistic approaches that will enable all children and youth to reach their full potential.

5. In working with the curriculum:

a. What strategies have you used to create an integrated program of study?

Ophea provides quality programs, services and training to schools and communities to enable children and youth to lead healthy active lives. Many of our programs and resources support educators in integrating H&PE with other areas of the curriculum, and all are developed and rigorously tested to ensure that they meet the needs of educators. These include:

- DPA cards (integrate DPA with literacy, numeracy, science and the arts). Program evaluations indicate that these supports had a positive impact on the implementation of DPA in schools.
- New H&PE Curriculum Implementation Support Resources (currently in development, this series of grade specific resources will provide opportunities for educators to integrate various other subject areas into the H&PE curriculum)
- Master Trainer program (trained educators and community members who provide ongoing support and training within their communities)
- Kids' Health Conference (provides an opportunity for educators to receive information and training on integrated programs and supports from organizations across Ontario)
- Take Action Elementary Resources (addresses curriculum expectations in H&PE related to substance use and abuse and is integrated with the Language Curriculum)
- Menu of Choices (incorporates healthy eating with business and family studies at the secondary level)

To learn more about any of Ophea's programs or resources, visit www.ophea.net and link to the programs page.

b. What advice would you provide to the working group on effective integration of subjects?

In order to be effective, integration must be full-fledged and authentic. Any integrated programs must meet curriculum expectations from both subject areas and not just reinforce messages from one area of the curriculum. For example,

simply using apples as a tool to count does not address healthy eating expectations in the H&PE curriculum and is therefore not an integrated activity. To truly integrate mathematics and H&PE, an educator could have students track their eating habits, and determine if they are meeting the requirements of Canada's Food Guide by graphing their food intake based on the food groups.

The revised H&PE curriculum offers many opportunities for educators to authentically integrate other subject areas and address learning priorities by focusing not just on outcomes but on the processes of learning.

c. How can the curriculum be most effectively aligned with new policies and initiatives?

Ophea believes that the revised H&PE curriculum presents a unique opportunity to mobilize multi-sectoral partnerships to ensure integrated and holistic approaches to support healthy active living for Ontario's children and youth. This, in turn, can impact a number of government policies, priorities and programs such as Safe Schools, childhood obesity, diabetes, Character Development, Roots of Violence, mental health, full day learning for 4 and 5 year olds, and poverty. Working with the Living Skills in the revised H&PE curriculum, educators can address a number of the learning priorities identified in the *Discussion Paper* and goals established by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in the areas of Character Development (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/character.html>) and the School Effectiveness Framework (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/framework.html>).

Research in educational improvement and health promotion shows that interventions to support student health and learning, such as the H&PE curriculum, are most effective when implemented within the context of a comprehensive school health (Healthy Schools) approach. *Foundations for a Healthy School* offers a philosophy and approach to address various issues in an integrated and flexible manner. Although this model is most closely related to "healthy choices and active living", it can also support a number of the additional learning priorities identified in the *Discussion Paper*.

The renamed "learning environment" branch at the Ministry of Education is a positive step towards better alignment, as it is clear that the curriculum is an important piece of the school community, but also that some learning priorities are best addressed through the school environment with support from the broader community and other sectors in order to ensure integrated and holistic approaches that will enable all children and youth to reach their full potential.

6. As noted on pages 6-7, the current curriculum review process involves extensive consultation and writing by educators from across the province to develop current, relevant and age-appropriate subject-based curriculum for Ontario students. What advice would you provide to inform future revision of the curriculum that will meet the needs of students in the year 2020?

Future revisions of the curriculum need to be informed by and integrated with other policies, and focused around creating a healthy school and learning environment. They should include clear linkages to other federal and provincial government policies and initiatives as well as strategies to assist educators, school-based administrators and school boards in understanding how they relate to and impact the school environment so that they can be more effectively implemented.

Ensuring that the curriculum documents are based on the most current research and data

will also ensure that they remain relevant in the future. The curriculum should be written with integration opportunities as a key component, and like the revised H&PE curriculum, should incorporate student feedback to ensure the documents are as relevant and effective as possible.

7. What is needed to support successful implementation of the curriculum, now and in the future?

Successful implementation of the curriculum relies on a few key concepts. First, it is crucial that alignment of key policies and priorities occurs and that educators are provided with direction and examples of how to address the learning priorities using an integrated, holistic approach.

Second, educators and communities must receive high quality, consistent implementation support, including funding, training and resources, for policies such as the revised H&PE curriculum (specifically Living Skills), DPA and *Foundations for a Healthy School*. These supports must integrate the learning priorities addressed in the *Discussion Paper* and curriculum expectations from various subject areas.

Next, the education system and the public must broaden their scope of what it means for schools to be successful beyond achievement in literacy and numeracy and push for accountability to meet the requirements of all subject areas and to ensure a safe, healthy and caring learning environment for all, ideally in the context of a comprehensive school health (Healthy Schools) approach.

Finally, the Ministry of Education needs to develop better connections and communication with the Faculties of Education to ensure that instruction of pre-service and in-service educators better prepares them to address the learning priorities identified in the *Discussion Paper*. Faculties and school boards need to coordinate effective mentoring and training programs that support educators in curriculum integration using an integrated, holistic approach.

All of this could be accomplished by supporting the further development of the Learning Environment branch of the Ministry of Education based on the example of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. Central alignment of policies, funding and implementation support would contribute to systematic capacity building across sectors and ensure that the potential impact of new and existing resources is maximized, leading to integrated and holistic approaches that will enable all children and youth to reach their full potential and ensure a safe, healthy and caring learning environment for all.

8. What additional comments or suggestions would you like to share about the elementary curriculum?

Many individuals and organizations share responsibility to address the learning priorities outlined in the *Discussion Paper*. They include: students, families, teachers, principals, school board administrators, public health professionals, sport and recreation providers, community and provincial organizations, businesses, and governments. Cross-sectoral partnerships between various sectors and government ministries are needed at a provincial, regional and local level in order to ensure integrated and holistic approaches that will enable all children and youth to reach their full potential.