

Study aims to improve schoolyards



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Kelly Gallagher-Mackay is an assistant professor at Laurier Brantford. *SUBMITTED PHOTO*

What's available to students outside the classroom is being investigated by a Brantford professor studying schoolyards across Ontario.

"Schoolyards really matter," said Kelly Gallagher-Mackay, an assistant professor in the faculty of liberal arts at Laurier Brantford.

She recently launched Schoolyards Count!, a citizen-science research project that asks parents, teachers and students to provide information on their own school grounds. The research is being done in partnership with Ophea, which stands for Ontario Physical and Health Education Association.

Gallagher-Mackay said research shows that quality schoolyards see more active children. That's particularly crucial, she said, at a time when children, for the first time ever, may have a shorter life expectancy than their parents due to inactivity and obesity.

Almost one-third of Canadians, aged five to 17, are overweight (19.8 per cent) or obese (11.7 per cent) and just 37 per cent of children, aged 11 to 15, play outdoors for more than two hours each day.

"We need to be looking at increasing the odds that kids get moving," said Gallagher-Mackay.

"Home isn't off the hook, but because kids spend as much time at school as they do asleep five days a week, 10 months of the year, we have to look at what schools are doing to promote health."

Gallagher-Mackay needs at least 1,000 of Ontario's 5,000 elementary and secondary schools to participate in the research, which is ongoing until the end of June.

She said it will take about an hour – including a trip to the office to gather information – for participants to use an "audit tool" to assess the quality of their schoolyards and answer some questions about how often it is used.

There are questions about whether schoolyards have playground equipment, fields, athletic tracks, courts, hopscotch markings and naturalized play spaces, such as rocks, logs and trees.

It also asks about the role of fundraising and partnerships to improve their schoolgrounds.

Gallagher-Mackay said that, with broad participation, they will be able to gauge whether there is a fundraising gap between richer and poorer schools and how that affects schoolyards. She said a 2017 study showed the 10 per cent of Ontario schools that fundraised the most raised 49 times what the 10 per cent that raised the least did.

She is hoping to access data on the average family income at individual schools.

She wants to provide a comprehensive picture of schoolyard quality across Ontario and spark conversations about what schools have, what they need and the connection between schools and students' well-being.

More than 250 responses have been gathered in the first week of the project. Among the participants are a group of student from Brantford Collegiate Institute. The plan is to release an interim report by the fall.

For more information and to participate, go to ophea.net/schoolyardscout.

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