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Brantford researcher studying quality of Ontario schoolyards

News 08:08 AM by [Natalie Paddon](/hamilton-author/natalie-paddon/3A3AF314-A189-40F4-A6BA-D01A1A67D56F/) (<mailto:npaddon@thespec.com>) [The Hamilton Spectator](#)

A Brantford university researcher is investigating the quality and equity of schoolyards across Ontario by asking parents, teachers and students to evaluate their own playgrounds.

Kelly Gallagher-Mackay, an assistant professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in Brantford, recently launched Schoolyards Count! — a citizen-science research project aimed at learning more about schoolyards across the province.

"Parents, educators and kids all care about their schoolyards, but we don't know very much about playground quality across the province," she said. "I think we should, because it matters for kids' health and their environmental awareness."

The research is being conducted in partnership with Ophea (Ontario Physical and Health Education Association).

Story continues below▼

Using an audit tool available online or on paper, participants can provide information about their playgrounds, ranging from whether they promote walking or cycling to school, to whether they include features that encourage physical activity such as basketball courts, play structures and tracks and fields, to whether they have trees, grass and gardens.

The audit, which takes no more than an hour to complete and uses public data, also asks about fundraising and partnerships to improve and support the schoolyard.

Reports have shown an increasing fundraising gap between schools in more- and less-affluent areas, raising questions about the impact that has on schoolyards, Gallagher-Mackay said.

"If we get broad participation (in the project), I think we'll be able to answer that," she said.

The goal is to have at least 1,000 of Ontario's 5,000 schools participate in the project, which is open until the end of June.

They're also hoping to get data from the province on the average family income per school to use in their analysis, Gallagher-Mackay said.

Story continues below▼

Dundas teacher Rich Gelder hopes to conduct the audit at the school attended by one of his sons to get a better idea of how outdoor play spaces for kids are designed.

"Obviously, as parents, we want to make sure that our kids have active spaces to be engaged in both structured and unstructured play," he said.

"You also want to make sure the space is safe and has a certain number of amenities."

Through the research, Gallagher-Mackay hopes to create a provincewide picture of what schoolyards look like and how much variation there is between them at a time when research has shown kids aren't getting enough physical activity.

"Everything we know about the health of our young people suggests that it's getting worse ... and that we need to look for the tools we have that will affect the most children and increase the probability that they're active and learning about their natural environment," she said.

"I believe that schoolyards — when we know that kids spend as much time at school as they do asleep five days a week, 10 months of the year, — are probably one of the most important settings in which we have a strong probability of successfully increasing physical ability."

The plan is to release an interim report by fall 2019 and a full report by summer 2020.

For more information and to participate, visit ophea.net/schoolyardscout (<http://ophea.net/schoolyardscout>).

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