



NOVEMBER 2011

# DISCUSSION BRIEF

REDUCING CHILDHOOD OBESITY  
BY INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES  
FOR ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

PREPARED BY:





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## OVERVIEW

Addressing Nova Scotia's high rates of risk factors for chronic disease has been an important area of focus for provincial government administrators for, at least, the last decade. Specifically, increased rates of childhood obesity – an issue now commonly referred to as an “epidemic”<sup>1</sup> – have resulted in the development of strategies aimed at improving health among children and youth. Nova Scotia's most recent efforts in this regard are identified in *Growing up Healthy: Discussion Framework for a childhood obesity prevention strategy*.

To support improved health and environmental outcomes, the Ecology Action Centre's (EAC) Active & Safe Routes to School program has consistently identified the need for safe and active transportation routes in school communities. Although many benefits are derived from active transportation, increasing physical activity levels by walking and cycling to school holds significant promise for reducing childhood obesity. This connection prompted the EAC to respond to the provincial government's request for input into its Framework.

### Issue

Active transportation to and from school presents an opportunity to ensure physical activity is a routine element of daily life for children and youth. Unfortunately, the current trend toward the closure of small, community-based schools in favor of the construction of large schools, often situated a distance away from the residents they are intended to serve, presents barriers to this opportunity and, therefore, to efforts aimed at curbing childhood obesity.

### Discussion Brief: Purpose

The EAC prepared this discussion brief to ask questions, promote discussion about the link between obesity reduction and school siting, and to seek a more in-depth analysis as to how school siting could be better aligned to support reduced childhood obesity in Nova Scotia.

### Discussion Brief: Audience

Although additional audiences will be identified, those most closely involved with the school siting process and the childhood-obesity framework represent the primary audiences for this brief. They include:

1. Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness
2. School boards across the province
3. Nova Scotia Department of Education

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<sup>1</sup> *Curbing Childhood Obesity: A Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights*.



## BENEFITS

The focus of this discussion brief is on improved alignment between the school siting process and provincial efforts to reduce childhood obesity. While numerous potential benefits can be derived from small schools that are located within walking and biking distance to residential areas, specific health benefits include the following:

### Population and System-Wide Health Benefits

With current physical activity rates at alarmingly low levels in Nova Scotia – less than 1% of grade 11 girls and 9% of grade 11 boys meet recommended targets,<sup>2</sup> it is essential to review the school siting process to determine how it can support efforts to decrease this risk factor for obesity. Although increased physical activity levels are the most obvious benefit, additional positive outcomes of a school siting process that supports decreased childhood obesity include:

- Decreased health care costs. These costs are higher among obese children in Nova Scotia compared with children with normal weights.<sup>3</sup>
- Improved ability of children and youth to be more independent in safely reaching their daily destinations by walking or biking.
- Reduced health disparities between children in lower socio-economic circumstances and those whose parents can afford greater access to physical activity opportunities. Schools, when open to the community, provide important opportunities for play and recreational activity for all.
- Reduced traffic congestion and increased safety in and around the school facility. Traffic congestion and fears about safety are key barriers to parents allowing their children to walk or cycle to school.
- Greater alignment with and, therefore, greater support for efforts to reduce childhood obesity in Nova Scotia and improve overall physical health.

Despite these benefits, active transportation choices are not always encouraged due to specific barriers that are linked to the location of a school within a community. These barriers must be understood and addressed in order to support the province's focus on reducing childhood obesity and are outlined on the following page.

<sup>2</sup> *Growing up Healthy: Discussion Framework for a Childhood Obesity Prevention Strategy*. Province of Nova Scotia, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> *Use and Cost of Health Services Among Overweight and Obese Canadian Children*. S. Kuhle et al 2010.

## BARRIERS

In discussions with youth involved in a Nova Scotia-based research study, entitled the Environment, Nutrition and Activity Project (ENACT), active forms of transportation, such as walking and cycling, were identified as the preferred travel options among participating youth. However, despite a desire to be active, focus group results identified traffic congestion; traffic safety; and inaccessible, non-existent, and unsafe infrastructure as common barriers to walking or biking to and from school. Research conducted by Active & Safe Routes to School found similar results with the top barrier to the use of active transportation to school being distance. If the school is not within a reasonable distance of students' homes, students will be bussed or driven to school by their parents.

In addition to removing the option for walking or cycling to school, distance creates long bus rides, which contribute to reduced active and passive recreation time. The Halifax Regional School Board's *Pupil Transportation Policy* indicates that "where possible," school-bus journeys should not last longer than an hour (i.e., two hours a day). Nevertheless, more than 400 students have school bus journeys that are longer than one hour each way with some students (166) travelling prior to 7 a.m.<sup>4</sup> Putting students, especially in elementary school, on long bus rides is "undesirable," according to a report submitted in April 2011 to the Nova Scotia Department of Education entitled *Steps to Effective and Sustainable Public Education in Nova Scotia*.

When schools are located a distance from residential areas and not easily accessed by continuous, connected, high-quality, and safe active transportation infrastructure, the above referenced barriers result. These barriers prevent health-promoting behaviours from occurring.

While school siting cannot be expected to solve all of the concerns regarding inactivity, obesity levels, and traffic safety, the location of a school within a community does represent a vital opportunity to coordinate and integrate public needs and interests with provincial efforts to reduce childhood obesity.

## SUMMARY OF KEY DISCUSSION POINTS

As part of the strategy aimed at identifying barriers to improved alignment between childhood obesity reduction and the school siting process, this discussion brief was developed to ask questions, promote discussion, and to seek a more in-depth analysis as to how school siting could be better aligned to reduce childhood obesity in Nova Scotia.

To achieve these purposes, a summary of discussion points is provided. This summary is followed by key questions that have been posed with the goal of initiating dialogue. Reference materials that are germane to the school siting process, including relevant sections of the Nova Scotia *Education Act*, are included in the appendices.

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<sup>4</sup> *Child-and Youth-Friendly Land-Use and Transport Guidelines for Nova Scotia*. O'Brien and Gilbert, 2010.

## Discussion Points

- Schools are a daily destination for children and youth. As such, their location represents a significant opportunity for encouraging active forms of transportation and instilling positive health behaviours, such as walking and cycling, at a young age.
- Youth who participated in ENACT focus group discussions have identified barriers that prevent them from making decisions linked to health-promoting behaviors such as walking and cycling.
- Distance between home and school and a lack of safe infrastructure have been identified as being among the barriers to active transportation to and from school. The trend toward the closure of small schools and the construction of large schools on larger lots, often a distance away from those they are intended to serve, contribute to those barriers.
- The process used to determine where schools are located in communities throughout Nova Scotia does not formally account for input from provincial government departments leading efforts to reduce childhood obesity. As a result, there is a lack of alignment between obesity-reduction efforts and a key provincial process directly impacting active transportation choices.
- The Province of Nova Scotia has identified its interest in reducing childhood obesity. Physical inactivity is a risk factor for obesity, and therefore, barriers to activity must be understood if they are to be removed.

## KEY QUESTIONS

1. How, from your perspective, can the school siting process be improved to be more supportive of childhood-obesity reduction?
2. What are the barriers to making these changes?

## CONCLUSION

Schools are a prime daily destination for children and youth. The process used to determine their location can play an important role in encouraging and supporting health promoting behaviours.

When schools are located near the residents they serve, when they are designed to leave a small footprint, when they are a true community centre for all residents, not just students, and when they are linked with safe, accessible, and quality infrastructure that facilitates the use of more active transportation, important benefits result.

The provincial government's vision for a healthier province, as identified in *Growing up Healthy: Discussion Framework for a childhood obesity prevention strategy*, states the following: "Nova Scotia is a national leader in supporting healthy eating and physical activity and the easiest place in Canada for children to grow up healthy."

The EAC wholeheartedly supports this vision and, in support of its realization, has provided this discussion brief to stimulate dialogue regarding the ways in which efforts to reduce childhood obesity and the provincial process for siting schools could be better aligned.

## Appendix A

### About Active & Safe Routes to School

Do you remember the good old days when kids walked or biked to school? It's time to bring them back for physical activity, safety and the environment.

Active & Safe Routes to School enables more children and youth to walk or wheel to school and other places they go. It fosters community cohesion and produces safer, calmer streets and neighbourhoods for active transportation. It does this by offering adaptable initiatives for schools and groups, including:

- **Walking School Buses:** supervised walking groups
- **WOW – We Often Walk (or Wheel):** weekly walk & wheel events
- **Pace Car:** anti-speeding initiative
- **Making Tracks:** safety skills training for walking, cycling, in-line skating or skateboarding
- **Special Events:** International Walk to School Month in October and Winter Walk Day in February
- **Youth Trans-Actions:** tailored youth-centred programming for junior and senior high ages
- **School Travel Planning:** creating active transportation plans for school communities

Active & Safe Routes to School is coordinated by the Ecology Action Centre in partnership with the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness as part of the Active Kids Healthy Kids initiative.

Learn more at [www.saferoutens.ca](http://www.saferoutens.ca).

Contact Active & Safe Routes to School at [asrts@ecologyaction.ca](mailto:asrts@ecologyaction.ca) or (902) 442-5055.



## Appendix B

### Nova Scotia Education Act and Regulations Referring to School Reviews

#### From the Nova Scotia Education Act:

##### Powers of Minister

141 The Minister may

- (f) after consultation with a school board, approve plans for school buildings;

##### Regulations by Governor in Council

146 (1) The Governor in Council may make regulations

- (d) respecting the construction, location and control of public school buildings;

##### Ministerial Education Act Regulations

Definitions respecting public school review

14 (1) In Sections 16 to 21,

- (a) "Identification Report" means a report prepared by a school board under Section 16 for the purpose of identifying a public school under its jurisdiction for review;
  - (b) "Impact Assessment Report" means a report in respect of a public school prepared by a school board under subsection 89(3) of the Act in accordance with the criteria specified in subsection 17(2);
  - (c) "Study Committee" means a study committee established under subsection 89(4) of the Act in accordance with the criteria specified in Section 18.
- (2) In clause 89A(b) of the Act, "consolidate the school, or a part of the school, with another public school", in relation to a public school, means to combine all or any part of the student population of the public school with the student population of another public school in the location of the other public school.
- (3) In clause 89A(c) of the Act and Sections 16 to 21, "permanently close", in relation to a public school, means to permanently discontinue the use of the public school for the offering of the public school program.

Subsection 14(3) replaced: N.S. Reg. 199/2009.

Section 14 replaced: N.S. Reg. 240/2008.

##### Application of public school review provisions

15 1)

Subsection 15(1) repealed: N.S. Reg. 199/2009.

(2) Sections 16 to 21 do not apply to any of the following public schools:

- (a) a public school that will be replaced by
  - (i) a newly constructed public school, or
  - (ii) another public school provided by the Province in respect of a direction, request or order of a court;
- (b) a public school whose physical facility, following consolidation of the public school with another public school, will continue to be used for the purposes of offering the public school program.

Subsection 15(2) amended: N.S. Reg. 199/2009.

(3) Sections 16 to 21 do not apply to the exercise by a school board of its authority pursuant to Section 90 of the Act.

Subsection 15(3) amended: N.S. Reg. 199/2009.

Section 15 replaced: N.S. Reg. 240/2008.

##### Identifying public school for review

16 (1) For the purpose of identifying a public school under its jurisdiction for review, a school board must prepare an Identification Report containing data, statistics and any additional information supporting the reasons for identification, including all of the following:

- (a) enrollment patterns within the school region for the current fiscal period and past 5-year fiscal periods;
- (b) enrollment projections within the school region for the next 5-year fiscal period;

- (c) general population patterns and projections within the school region for the past, current and next 5-year fiscal periods;
  - (d) factors relating to the physical condition of the public school, including all of the following:
    - (i) its ability as a facility to deliver the public school program,
    - (ii) facility utilization, including excess space,
    - (iii) condition of the building structure and systems,
    - (iv) costs associated with its maintenance and operation.
- [2] An Identification Report may contain data, statistics or other information about any of the following:
- (a) current municipal or Provincial plans for infrastructure development within the school region;
  - (b) the geographic isolation of the public school, if any, within the school region;
  - (c) factors relating to student transportation to and from the public school;
  - (d) proposed development, including residential or economic development, within the school region.
- [3] No later than April 1 or, for the school review period commencing April 1, 2008, no later than April 30, a school board that has prepared an Identification Report must make the report available to the public.
- Section 16 replaced: N.S. Reg. 240/2008.

**Impact Assessment Report**

- 17 [1] On identifying a public school for review in accordance with Section 16, a school board must prepare an Impact Assessment Report in respect of the public school and table the Impact Assessment Report at a public meeting of its members no later than May 31.
- [2] An Impact Assessment Report must
- (a) be made in the form approved by the Minister;
  - (b) contain the Identification Report prepared under Section 16; and
  - (c) outline a comprehensive review of the potential impact of each decision that a school board may make pursuant to Section 89A of the Act, including data, statistics, and any additional information about all of the following:
    - (i) the capability of the public school to deliver the public school program,
    - (ii) any educational benefits to students of the public school that would arise from their attendance at another public school, including access to services and programs such as special services, particular courses and extra-curricular programs,
    - (iii) the time and distance involved in transporting students of the public school to another public school,
    - (iv) the ability of students of the public school to continue to access and participate in extra-curricular activities,
    - (v) the impact on any public school that might receive the students of the public school,
    - (vi) capital construction planning for the school region,
    - (vii) any property services efficiencies that would be gained,
    - (viii) the operational and capital requirements arising from maintaining the status quo,
    - (ix) any efficiencies in educational staffing that would be gained,
    - (x) the extent of community usage of the school over the last year,
    - (xi) any alternatives available to the community with respect to facilities available for community or regional use,
    - (xii) any other impact on the community,
    - (xiii) whether a consolidation of the public school, or a part of the public school, might result in permanently closing the public school.
- Section 17 replaced: N.S. Reg. 240/2008.

## Appendix C

### Nova Scotia Education Act and Regulations Referring to School Siting

#### Governor in Council Education Act Regulations made under Section 146 of the *Education Act*: School buildings and site selection

- 7 (1) For the purposes of this Section, “private sector developer” means a person, or association of persons, including but not limited to a joint venture or a limited partnership, other than the Province or a school board, who agrees with the Province to construct a school.
- (2) For the purpose of clause 64(2)(e) of the Act, the short and long term plans to be developed by a school board for the provision of barrier-free access to and within educational facilities shall be composed of
  - (a) a short term component which shall
    - (i) be prepared on an annual basis,
    - [(ii)] identify current needs, and
    - [(iii)] provide for appropriate renovations and implementation schedules; and
  - (b) a long term component which shall
    - (i) be prepared on a longer than annual basis,
    - (ii) identify long term needs, and
    - (iii) provide for appropriate renovations and implementation schedules in an orderly and timely basis, as resources become available.
- (3) Each school board shall, at least annually, determine whether the buildings used for school purposes, and the equipment in them, are adequate to provide for the students to be enrolled in the ensuing school year or years.
- (4) Each school board shall report to the Minister
  - (a) the extent to which it is necessary to erect, acquire, purchase, alter, add to, improve, furnish or equip buildings for school purposes or barrier-free access, or to acquire land therefore;
  - (b) the extent to which the cost may be provided from the board’s annual budget for capital expenditure, repair and renovation, including any accumulated surplus;
  - (c) the amount which the board estimates may be provided by funds borrowed by the board pursuant to Section 87 of the Act.
- (5) A school board, upon receipt from the Minister of approval in principle of a capital project involving the acquisition of land, shall recommend three proposed sites for the project; the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal will inspect the sites and recommend the most appropriate site to the Minister and the Minister will authorize the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal to acquire the approved site.
- (6) Despite subsection (5), where the Minister considers it advisable to have a school constructed by a private sector developer, the school board, in consultation with the Minister, shall, upon receipt from the Minister of approval in principle of a capital project involving the acquisition of land, recommend three proposed sites for the project; the private sector developer will inspect the sites and, with the agreement of the school board, recommend the most appropriate site to the Minister and the Minister shall decide whether to accept the recommendation.
- (7) If the Minister accepts the recommendation from the private sector developer pursuant to subsection (6), the Minister shall select the recommended site.
- (8) If the Minister does not accept the recommendation from the private sector developer pursuant to subsection (6), and if the Minister still considers it advisable to have a school constructed by a private sector developer, the procedure respecting site recommendation and the following steps pursuant to subsection (6) shall apply.

## Appendix D

### Impact Assessment Report

#### From the Ministerial Education Act Regulations Made Under Section 145 of the *Education Act*

- 17 (1) On identifying a public school for review in accordance with Section 16, a school board must prepare an Impact Assessment Report in respect of the public school and table the Impact Assessment Report at a public meeting of its members no later than May 31.
- (2) An Impact Assessment Report must
- (a) be made in the form approved by the Minister;
  - (b) contain the Identification Report prepared under Section 16; and
  - (c) outline a comprehensive review of the potential impact of each decision that a school board may make pursuant to Section 89A of the Act, including data, statistics, and any additional information about all of the following:
    - (i) the capability of the public school to deliver the public school program,
    - (ii) any educational benefits to students of the public school that would arise from their attendance at another public school, including access to services and programs such as special services, particular courses and extra-curricular programs,
    - (iii) the time and distance involved in transporting students of the public school to another public school,
    - (iv) the ability of students of the public school to continue to access and participate in extra-curricular activities,
    - (v) the impact on any public school that might receive the students of the public school,
    - (vi) capital construction planning for the school region,
    - (vii) any property services efficiencies that would be gained,
    - (viii) the operational and capital requirements arising from maintaining the status quo,
    - (ix) any efficiencies in educational staffing that would be gained,
    - (x) the extent of community usage of the school over the last year,
    - (xi) any alternatives available to the community with respect to facilities available for community or regional use,
    - (xii) any other impact on the community,
    - (xiii) whether a consolidation of the public school, or a part of the public school, might result in permanently closing the public school.
- Section 17 replaced: N.S. Reg. 240/2008.



**Ecology Action Centre**  
40 YEARS OF ACTION

This brief was developed to stimulate discussion regarding the need to ensure that provincial school siting decisions support efforts to reduce childhood obesity by increasing opportunities for active transportation to and from school.

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