

Steep fall in implementation of physical activity policy in Ontario schools

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Children have become less physically active in school, despite teachers recognizing the importance of daily movement. Now, a new study published in *BMC Public Health* reveals the implementation of Ontario's

Daily Physical Activity (DPA) policy is in sharp decline. The reasons, according to the study, include time constraints and low confidence among teachers about their ability to implement the policy.

The study has been co-authored by education professor Barbara Fenesi, Lauren Martyn, Hannah Bigelow, and Deborah Chiodo from the Faculty of Education; Jeffrey Graham from Brock University; and Michelle Ogrodnik from the University of Waterloo.

Space, time and inadequate training are the reasons teachers aren't implementing DPA in their classrooms. Insufficient training has created a lack of confidence in teachers about how to use it, Fenesi said.

Under this provincial policy, all [elementary school children](#) must receive at least 20 minutes of moderate to [vigorous physical activity](#) each school day during instructional time. It can be done all at once or completed in segments throughout the day.

"The DPA policy is conceptually a wonderful way to offer more [physical activity](#) to children during the school day," Fenesi said. "However, realistically, teachers are faced with innumerable [classroom](#) demands that make following the guideline a challenge."

What's more, teachers' use of DPA has declined dramatically over the past five years. In 2015, about half of teachers were following the guideline in their classrooms. Now, that number has been cut to 23 percent.

"It's clear the same barriers to DPA implementation identified in 2015 are alive and well in today's classroom," Fenesi said. "With an ever-increasing demand on teachers' time and resources in other areas of teaching, it's not surprising DPA implementation is declining."

This decline also mirrors the overall lack of physical activity in children. Fenesi notes that between 1978-2004, the number of overweight and obese children between the ages of two and 17 increased from 15 to 26 percent.

"It's projected that more than one in three Canadian adults will be obese by 2031," Fenesi said. "There's a dire need for [early intervention](#) to transform the trajectory of children's health and well-being, and schools are an ideal setting for these early interventions to take place."

While the DPA implementation numbers are low, Fenesi stressed teachers want their students to be more physically active in their classrooms. In fact, teachers who implement DPA found that their students had better attention and learning in their classrooms.

Fenesi and her colleagues surveyed and interviewed teachers to see what tools can help them better use the DPA guideline.

First, teachers wanted more training that emphasizes evidence-based benefits of DPA for student learning and well-being.

Second, they wanted an increase in community partnerships that help teachers implement DPA through volunteers, elders, sports organizations, and community activity initiatives.

Third, teachers thought greater accountability was important with different staff having responsibility for implementing, enforcing, and ensuring there are adequate resources to follow DPA.

Finally, teachers recommended improving strategies for school-wide implementation. For example, activities could occur during morning announcements, which could alleviate stress with teachers having one less responsibility.

"We wanted to bring a voice to Ontario [teachers](#) to help identify the barriers to DPA implementation and provide recommendations for improved DPA success while creating happier, healthier children and communities," Fenesi said.

More information: Lauren Martyn et al, A mixed method investigation of teacher-identified barriers, facilitators and recommendations to implementing daily physical activity in Ontario elementary schools, *BMC Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-022-14359-3](#)

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