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Ontario Ministry of Education  
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Ontario's Education Strategy: *"From Great to Excellent"*.

**Response to the Ministry of Education re: curriculum**

"Breastfeeding has measurable and profound impacts on the health of infants (children) and society. It makes important contributions to growth and to cognitive and psychosocial development, and therefore leads to healthier populations, capable of greater achievement and enjoying longer life." <sup>15</sup>

"Changing positively the perception and place of breastfeeding depends on how successful we are in transforming the way the community understands and relates to child feeding and development, and the implications for the health of children and mothers and thus society as a whole, throughout the life course." <sup>5</sup>

*What are the skills, knowledge and characteristics students need to succeed after they have completed school, and how do we better support all learners in their development?*

Students need to have an understanding in regard to:

- Their ability and potential to positively influence the health of their own children and future generations through optimal health practices. Students need to have an awareness of the importance of healthy relationships and nurturing behaviours achieved by embedding consistent and evidence based information in all educational messaging targeting health, family/relationship dynamics and parenting. Breastfeeding is an evidence supported early parenting/health practice that provides both individual and societal short-term and long-term health benefits and contributes to building healthy families and raising healthy children. <sup>21,15</sup>
- The risks to maternal and infant health and well-being associated with not breastfeeding, including the heightening of the effects of inequities related to the Social Determinants of Health. They need to be aware that other sources of milk used for infant feeding represent a deviation from the biological norm for infant nutritional needs. <sup>6</sup>
- Breastfeeding being a learned experience for mothers, but an innate and instinctive behaviour for babies. Students need to know that all mothers, even physically and psychologically disadvantaged mothers, can achieve successful breastfeeding outcomes with peer, family and professional support. <sup>9,20</sup>
- The Health Canada recommendations for infant feeding. <sup>13</sup>

- The basic anatomy and physiology of the breast and how the body is designed to support breastfeeding.
- The importance of gaining factual information as it relates to health, infant feeding and breastfeeding.<sup>11</sup>
- The influence of media and marketing practices that influence health behaviour decisions, including infant feeding.<sup>22</sup>

Students need to develop:

- Awareness and acceptance that breastfeeding is the natural way of feeding babies, with a women's rights to breastfeed anytime, anywhere protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The belief that breastfeeding, particularly in public, is an immoral or undesirable behavior has been identified as one of the most important factors influencing the intentions of teenagers not to breastfeed their first infant.<sup>1,6,7,18</sup>
- Understanding that self-efficacy and self-advocacy are important skills in making and supporting health decisions. Breastfeeding supports are available in all communities. Developing an awareness of these supports, and the skills and confidence to access these supports, may assist students to develop skills in problem solving and contribute to student self-efficacy for breastfeeding success when they become parents. Self-efficacy is a major contributing factor to breastfeeding success.<sup>2</sup>

*What does student well-being mean to you, and what is the role of the school in supporting it?*

Student well-being involves:

- Respect for one's body and body functions. It is important for students to be able to identify media messages which **compete** with health messages regarding breasts, breast health, and breast function. Research suggests teens are influenced by the body images in the media without knowing the other important function of the female breast and the health benefits of breastfeeding.<sup>3,8</sup>
- Possessing knowledge and confidence in how their bodies work

The school can contribute to a student's well-being by:

- Providing evidenced-based information to students on the normal function of the human body, the breast and its function, which is free from myths, commercial advertising or popular media.
- Providing support in the development of skills related to critical thinking as it applies to commercial products such as the use of commercial infant formulas. As teens are being targeted with formula ads through popular entertainment magazines, students may

benefit from gaining appreciation of how global health organizations have attempted to regulate unethical marketing practices with developing and developed countries.<sup>22</sup>

- Assisting educators to understand the importance of providing positive role models and accurate information to adolescents or younger school-aged children. It can take several years to build positive attitudes with reference to health behaviours, making early introduction of information crucial. Therefore, breastfeeding information in schools requires a particular focus on attitudes towards breastfeeding and presenting breastfeeding as a normal healthy feeding behaviour.<sup>12, 14</sup>

*From your perspective, what further opportunities exist to close gaps and increase equity to support all children and students in reaching their full potential?*

Further opportunities exist to close gaps and increase equity to support all children and students by providing educators with the understanding that:

- Because breastfeeding is prevalent to a greater degree in higher socioeconomic populations, lower income populations may be at a disadvantage in their opportunities to learn about breastfeeding.<sup>4,17</sup>
- When breastfeeding is not practiced in the home and IF it is absent from the educational curriculum, students with low socio economic status are at an increased disadvantage in being able to benefit from future economic and positive health effects of breastfeeding.<sup>21</sup>
- In order to better close the gaps of inequity, health and breastfeeding messaging should be interwoven throughout educational messaging, as opposed to only curriculum targeting specific population i.e. family health. There is a growing awareness that it is best not to confine learning about health to one time and one subject area, but rather involve links across subject areas and school years. Ideally, breastfeeding should be taught with a holistic approach. Breastfeeding could be woven into topic areas such as Personal, Social and Health Education, as well as politics, international economics, social studies, science, mathematics, family life education, sex education, life skills, citizenship, child studies, media studies and even religious studies.<sup>14</sup>

Further opportunities exist to close gaps and increase equity to support all children and students by:

- Providing information on how breastfeeding has positive effects on the health and wealth of the baby, mother, family, larger community.<sup>4</sup>
- Providing equal and congruent education to all children. Both male and female students need to know about breasts, how they function and what benefit they have for

nurturing children. Research suggests that breastfeeding success can rely heavily on the support mothers receive from their partners. This research reinforces why breastfeeding knowledge is just as important for male youth as it is for females.<sup>1,9,16,10</sup>

- Introducing breastfeeding to students early in the education system can formulate attitudes which may prepare them for their future parenting roles. Public education needs to support this knowledge so that future generations will have the knowledge, skills and motivation to support infant and maternal health in their own families and communities.<sup>19</sup>

### Summary

Breastfeeding is a life skill which requires prior knowledge and attitudinal acceptance. One primary way to increase the likelihood of later breastfeeding success and thereby increasing child health is to educate youth about breastfeeding concepts before they conceive and to expose student to experiences and conversation that presents breastfeeding as a normal, expected health behavior.

In conclusion, “as long as schools can choose to opt in or out of teaching about breastfeeding, it will be taken up only by those with a real enthusiasm for and interest in the issue. Thus, it appears crucial to start by educating the teachers about the importance of breastfeeding before it will be possible to embark upon educating pupils in this area.”<sup>14</sup>

### Additional Resources

- Programs that have outlined how breastfeeding can be woven into educational curriculum are provide by the New York State Health Department, Ontario Public Health Association and the Marion County Health Department
- Breastfeeding education in the school setting: a review of the literature provides suggestions for holistic breastfeeding promotion throughout curriculum, information for supporting teachers and recommendations for classroom activities related to breastfeeding.

References - Ontario's Education Strategy: "From Great to Excellent".  
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