



The Regional Municipality of Durham Report

From: Commissioner & Medical Officer of Health
Report: #2023-INFO-74
Date: September 1, 2023

Subject:

Public Health Services to Support School Health, including Mental Health Promotion and Substance Use Prevention

Recommendation:

Receive for information

Report:

1. Purpose

1.1 To provide information on Durham Region Health Department's (DRHD's) school-based health promotion services, including mental health promotion and substance use prevention.

2. Background

2.1 The [Ontario Public Health Standards](#): Requirements for Programs, Services, and Accountability (OPHS) are published by the Minister of Health under the authority of section 7 of the *Health Protection and Promotion Act* to specify the mandatory health programs and services provided by boards of health.

2.2 Boards of health are accountable for implementing the OPHS including the protocols and guidelines that are referenced in the standards.

2.3 As per the OPHS, DRHD is required to examine the complex interplay between individual, family, school, and community/societal factors to develop programs and services to reduce burdens associated with substance use and mental health.

2.4 The OPHS and its [Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction Guideline](#), [Tobacco, Vapour and Smoke Guideline](#), and [Mental Health Promotion Guideline](#), provide direction to boards of health on:

- a. Required approaches to developing and implementing programs and services that contribute to achieving optimal health of school-aged children and youth through partnerships and collaboration with school boards and schools.
- b. Required approaches and interventions in developing and implementing a program of public health interventions for substance use prevention and harm reduction.
- c. Required approaches and interventions in developing and implementing a program of public health interventions for comprehensive tobacco control.
- d. Considering mental health promotion within their processes for planning, implementing, and evaluating programs of public health interventions.
 - Mental health promotion is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals and communities to increase control over their lives and improve their mental health. Beyond a focus on risk factors, it is an approach that aims to improve the health of individuals, families, communities, and society by influencing the complex interactions between social and economic factors, the physical environment, and individual behaviours and conditions across the lifespan (i.e., the social determinants of health).

3. Local Trends

- 3.1 The [Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey](#) (OSDUHS) is a population survey of Ontario students in Grades 7 through 12. OSDUHS began in 1977 and is the longest ongoing school survey in Canada – and one of the longest in the world.
- 3.2 According to OSDUHS, from 2009 to 2017:
 - a. There was a significant decrease in the [rate of early alcohol use](#) among Durham Region secondary school students.
 - b. There was no statistical difference in the [trend of early alcohol use](#) between Durham Region and the rest of Ontario.
 - c. There was a significant decrease in the [rate of past year alcohol use](#) among Durham Region students.
 - d. In 2017, Durham Region students reported similar [rates of trying alcohol, cannabis, and cigarettes](#), when compared to Ontario.
 - e. In 2017 students' daily [use of e-cigarettes was lower than](#) provincial rates.

- f. Between 2009 and 2017 there was a significant decline in youth use of alcohol use (past year), binge drinking (past month), and hazardous harmful drinking (past year).
- 3.3 The [Findings from the 2021 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey](#) indicate an increase in youth prescription opioid use provincially, in Durham Region the increase in opioid poisoning emergency department visits for those ages zero to 19 is not statistically significant.
- 3.4 Between 2017 and 2019, [past year e-cigarette use doubled](#) among Ontario students in Grades 7 to 12.
- 3.5 Among high school students, [consuming cannabis edibles increased significantly](#) from 2017 to 2019.
- 3.6 Since 2009, there was a significant increase in the [rate of fair to poor self-reported mental health](#) among Durham Region students. There was no statistical difference in the trend of fair to poor self-reported mental health between Durham Region and the rest of Ontario.
- 3.7 From 2015 to 2017, there was a significant increase in the [rate of fair to poor self-reported mental health](#) in Durham Region students.

4. DRHD Programs and Services

- 4.1 [Comprehensive school health](#) is an internationally recognized approach to supporting improvements in students' educational outcomes while addressing school health in a planned, integrated, and holistic way.
- 4.2 This whole-school model builds capacity to incorporate well-being as an essential aspect of student achievement. Actions address four distinct but inter-related components that comprise a comprehensive school health approach: 1) social and physical environment; 2) teaching and learning; 3) healthy school policy; and 4) partnerships and services.
- 4.3 When actions in all four components are harmonized, students are supported to realize their full potential as learners, and as healthy, productive members of society.
- 4.4 Health and education are interdependent: healthy students are better learners, and better-educated individuals are healthier. Research has shown that comprehensive school health is an effective way to enhance that linkage, improving both health and educational outcomes and encouraging healthy behaviours that last throughout life.
- 4.5 In the classroom, comprehensive school health facilitates improved academic achievement and can lead to fewer behavioural problems. In the broader school environment, it helps students develop the skills they need to be physically and

emotionally healthy for life.

4.6 Comprehensive School Health:

- a. Recognizes that healthy students learn better and achieve more.
- b. Understands that schools can directly influence students' health and behaviours.
- c. Encourages healthy lifestyle choices, and promotes students' health and wellbeing.
- d. Incorporates health into all aspects of school and learning.
- e. Links health and education issues and systems.
- f. Needs the participation and support of families and the community at large.

4.7 In Durham Region, all elementary and secondary schools have an assigned public health nurse (PHN) to deliver health promotion services and support comprehensive school health.

4.8 PHNs assess local school needs, plan and implement strategies in collaboration with the school community and evaluate. PHNs are involved in school health action teams, youth engagement strategies, provide curriculum support, attend parent council meetings and other school related wellness committees.

4.9 Following are some examples of strategies PHNs use in schools related to substance use and mental health:

- a. Work to address substance use risk and protective factors to prevent substance use or delay the age of initiation of substances.
- b. Work with student leaders to deliver health teaching on vaping using the "[Not an Experiment](#)" escape room activity to Grade 7 and Grade 8 peers.
- c. Provide training on Brief Contact Interventions (BCI) to educators for discussions with youth; BCI includes providing opportunistic advice, discussion, negotiation or encouragement on vaping or smoking cessation that takes between 5 to 10 minutes.
- d. [Presentations](#) to parents at school community council meetings in collaboration with Health Protection Division to provide teaching on both health risks and legal risks related to vaping at school.
- e. Host an annual Durham Youth Drug Awareness Conference with community partners and high schools to foster opportunity between school-assigned PHNs and student leaders to deliver comprehensive strategies in school on

mental health, substance use, and vaping.

- f. Collaborate with school board mental health leadership teams to ensure a streamlined consistent approach to mental health promotion in schools and development of evidence-based mental health promotion resources.
- g. Participate on school board mental health and wellbeing committees.
- h. Promote and support educators with implementing [School Mental Health Ontario](#) materials and resources. School Mental Health Ontario supports schools to enhance student mental health through the use of evidence-informed strategies and services.
- i. Collaborate with schools to develop comprehensive plans to address and promote Mental Health within school communities utilizing School Mental Health Ontario resources and tools.
- j. Support the implementation of TAMI (Talking About Mental Illness) anti-stigma initiative in Durham schools. TAMI is a program for youth in schools which aims to raise awareness and increase understanding of mental illness. A primary goal of TAMI is to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness so that youth are more likely to seek help and/or help others, thereby improving their chances for managing mental health and improving long term outcomes.

4.10 During the 2022/2023 school year, schools consulted their PHN on mental health and vaping in schools as two priority issues.

4.11 Regarding student mental health, and preventing or delaying student substance use, the presence of risk factors and protective factors in a person's life, and their ability to mitigate or strengthen these factors, impacts outcomes. Risk factors make individuals more likely to experience harms related to substance use, whereas protective factors decrease the likelihood of these harms. Both risk and protective factors are present at the individual, family, school, and community/societal level.

4.12 PHNs assess risk and protective factors to inform the development of programs and services across varying substance use patterns in accordance with the OPHS.

4.13 School-based prevention efforts include the development of curriculum support materials, awareness and education strategies, as well as youth engagement activities.

4.14 To ensure environments are conducive to fostering health, DRHD staff informs, develops, and implements healthy public policies that address prevention, harm reduction and risk and protective factors for substance use and mental health, to foster healthy environments where students live, learn, work and play. One example of this work would be the implementation of the School Board Smoking and Vaping policy.

5. Relationship to Strategic Plan

5.1 This report aligns with/addresses the following strategic goals and priorities in the Durham Region Strategic Plan:

a. Goal 2: Community Vitality

- 2.2 Enhance community safety and well-being.
- 2.3 Influence the social determinants of health to improve outcomes for vulnerable populations.
- 2.4 Support a high quality of life for all through human services delivery.

b. Goal 5: Service Excellence

- 5.1 Optimize resources and partnerships to deliver exceptional quality services and value.
- 5.2 Collaborate for a seamless service experience.

6. Conclusion

6.1 DRHD staff continues to work with school communities to monitor and respond to local trends related to youth mental health and substance use.

Respectfully submitted,

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