Public Policy Processes and Getting Physical Activity into Alberta’s Urban Schools

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Background

Overweight in Canadian children has increased significantly

- 1981: 15% of boys and 15% of girls were overweight
- 1996: 28.8% of boys and 23.6% of girls were overweight
  (Tremblay and Willms, 2000)

- Obesity described as an epidemic
- Similar to other industrialized countries
  (Lau, 1999)
Background

Children are insufficiently active

- Declines in energy expenditure are a likely cause of overweight
  (Hill and Melanson, 1999)

- Only 44% of Canadian children were sufficiently active to attain health
  (Cragg, et al., 1999)
Background

Policies Affecting Physical Activity of Children

- Schools are an ideal setting to increase physical activity (PA)
- Children attend school 200 days/year
- The policy environment of schools impacts levels of PA
  i.e. curriculum, facilities, teachers, parent participation
Background

PA in the school setting:
- Physical Education is mandatory in Alberta schools in K-10
- Various intra-mural and extra-curricular activities

- Daily Physical Activity Initiative adopted in 2005
- Mandated 30 minutes of physical activity each school day

- Active Transportation to School, i.e. walking or bicycling
- Organized Walk-to-School (WTS) initiatives exist
  i.e., Walking School Bus, Walking Wednesdays, etc.
Objective of Research

☑ Daily Physical Activity
☒ Walk-to-School Initiatives

• To explore the public policy processes that have resulted in decision-makers in Alberta choosing to add Daily Physical Activity to the school curriculum and not adopting active transportation initiatives such as the Walking School Bus.

• Research limited to Edmonton and Calgary
• Focused on elementary schools, Kindergarten to Grade 6
Study Design

Part 1
- Gathered information about organizations influencing public policy affecting PA in schools
  i.e. mission statements, organizational charts, position statements

Part 2
- Conducted 20 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders and decision-makers
- Collected qualitative data about the policy processes
- Analyzed using NUD*IST N6 based on conceptual framework
Conceptual Framework

1. Composition and Nature of Policy Communities
   (Pross, 1992; Skogstad and Coleman, 1990)

2. Policy Networks
   (Pross, 1992; Skogstad and Coleman, 1990; Lindquist, 1992)

3. Policy Cycle
   (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995; Kingdon, 1995)

4. Interests, Ideas, Institutions
   (Goldstein, 1993; Lavis, et al., 2000)
Conceptual Framework

• Kingdon’s 3 Streams Model
  (Kingdon, 1995)

• 3 Streams: Problem, Solution, Politics
• 3 streams can evolve concurrently, but independently
• Policy change most likely when streams become ‘coupled’
• Forces that couple streams are the interests, ideas, and institutions of the actors
Alberta’s Policy Community Surrounding PA in Schools

• Illustrated in Pross’s Bubble Diagram
  (Pross, 1992)

• Shows the Sub-Government and the Attentive Public
Kingdon's Streams: Why DPA was Adopted

Streams

Problem
Physical inactivity in children
- Rising rates of obesity in children
- Inactive children learn poorly

Solution
Provide DPA in schools:
In education sector:
  - to help kids learn better
In health sector:
  - to improve health

Politics
Physician is Minister of Education

Causes of/Barriers to Coupling of Streams

- Broad awareness of obesity problem
- Magnitude recognized in health sector
- Recognized by the education sector

- Benefits for education and health
- Solution existed for 20+ years
- Supported by research
- Compatible with type of solutions already used by health and education
- Some existing institutional connection

- Minimal funding for facilities/equipment
- Schools facing a “crowded curriculum”

Outcomes

- Minister as policy entrepreneur has power to mandate change

Provincial Daily Physical Activity Initiative
Kingdon’s Streams: Why WTS Wasn’t Adopted

**Problem**
Physical inactivity in children
- Rising rates of obesity in children
- Inactive children learn poorly
- Car congestion, safety risks at schools
- Environmental (air pollution) concerns

**Solution**
Parent-organized active transportation initiatives
- Organized by individual schools

**Politics**
 Advocacy by non-profit organizations

**Politics**
Advocacy by non-profit organizations

- Recognition of obesity problem in health
- Value of physical activity recognized in education sector

- Obesity a secondary concern of schools
- Traffic safety recognized at local level

- Fragmented description of problem is not salient to key decision-makers
- Air pollution not considered a problem of education sector

- Few hard costs associated with solution
- Solution is not universally feasible for all students
- Requires development of grassroots commitment

- No clear responsibility for solving problem
- Solution not clearly linked to problem by research

- Non-profits involved are weak politically
- No political activity surrounding the problem as it is framed
- No well-placed policy entrepreneur

Few WTS programs at schools
Discussion

Research and beliefs supported DPA

- Health and Phys. Ed. teachers promoting DPA since 1979
- Incorporated new evidence of PA increasing academics
- All educators interviewed believed DPA improved learning
- Therefore teachers’ union was not opposed to DPA
Discussion

Neither Research nor Values support WTS

• Need for research to show benefits of WTS that are valued by:
  – Parents: well-being of children, but specifically education
  – Teachers: learning outcomes
  – Students: fun, socializing
  – Society: ideas in good currency, i.e. reducing GHG

• Build evidence over time to support a proposed policy solution, it could take years

• Walking is not valued in Alberta
Discussion

Enhancing WTS as a Solution:

- Circulate the proposed policy solution within communities of interest so it is refined and has improved feasibility
- Make benefits accrue to those who must implement the solution i.e. parents, school boards

Working the Political Stream

- Identify and recruit a champion or policy entrepreneur
- Be prepared for the opening of a policy window, either political or problem
- Conduct research to understand the values and beliefs of the decision-makers, don’t make assumptions
Thank you for your interest

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