



# Alberta's Daily Physical Activity Policy for Schools



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In 2005, the Alberta Ministry of Education adopted a daily physical activity (DPA) policy. This policy was based on the belief that healthy students learn better and that schools have a role to play in providing supportive environments that promote healthy, active lifestyles (Alberta Education, 2005). The provincially mandated policy requires schools to provide a minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity per school day for students in grades 1-9 (Alberta Education, 2005). This story highlights the development of Alberta's DPA policy and key lessons learned throughout the process.

### Origins of the DPA Policy: Bubbling of Ideas for 20+ Years

The idea for DPA in schools is not as recent as some may think. According to DPA policy researcher Cathy Gladwin, DPA has origins dating back to the 1980s when physical education teachers across Canada began collecting information and promoting the idea that students benefit from being active every day. In particular, 1998 marked a pivotal time for physical activity promotion in Alberta with the launch of the Active Living Strategy (Recreation Alberta, 1998). The Strategy played a key role in the development of DPA policy by recommending the following: "That all Alberta schools create a school environment that provides encouragement and opportunities for students to be physically active during each school day (Recreation Alberta, 1998)."

**The school was a setting where the majority of kids could be reached on mass, and the government could have a role in improving the physical activity levels and therefore the health of kids.**

Cathy Gladwin, MSc  
Alberta DPA Policy Researcher



An Alberta Junior High School, Wikimedia



DPA policy in Alberta was also influenced by wider factors. For example, on an international scale, there was increasing evidence from countries around the world that childhood obesity was a growing problem. Further, by the early 2000s, there was widespread recognition that children were suffering negative health outcomes, such as increased risk of obesity and Type 2 diabetes, associated with physical inactivity. Research evidence and media reports at the time also highlighted the need for governments to take action to protect the health of children (Gladwin, Church, & Plotnikoff, 2008).

## Window of Opportunity: Policy Fast-Tracking and the Role of a Champion

Typically, when a new policy is developed and adopted by a government, bureaucrats discuss the issue, present policy options, decide on the best idea, and then announce and deliver on that policy. However, according to Gladwin, DPA was different: “It hadn’t followed the regular channel that policy development does within government.” The provincial DPA policy was announced in 2003 by Minister of Education Dr. Lyle Oberg (Alberta Education, 2006)

Date	Event
1970-1980s	Physical and Health Education teachers across Canada started noticing that students were not as active as they used to be. Fitness levels were decreasing and students were not interested in being active.
1980s	Growth of the 'active living movement' in Canada. People were beginning to acknowledge that the convenience of daily living was negatively influencing physical activity levels.
1984	The Health and Physical Education Council (HPEC) of the Alberta Teachers' Association tables a position paper on daily physical education calling for 30 minutes of physical education per day in Alberta schools.
1990s	Emerging focus on heart health initiatives across Canada that promoted early interventions to support health throughout one's life. Interventions shifted from individuals to population level interventions.
1998	Alberta launches the Active Living Strategy to promote activity throughout one's lifespan.
2000s	Widespread recognition across Canada and internationally that children and youth were suffering negative health consequences associated with physical inactivity.
2000	Alberta Ministry of Learning launches a new physical education curriculum that emphasizes the attainment of life-long active living.
2003	Alberta Minister of Learning, Dr. Lyle Oberg, announces the Daily Physical Activity initiative for all students.
2003	Alberta's Commission on Learning recommends a new wellness program for all students that includes daily activity to encourage children to adopt a healthy lifestyle.
2005	The Daily Physical Activity Initiative is launched in Alberta Schools for students in grades 1 to 9, providing students with 30 minutes of physical activity each school day.

**Timeline of DPA policy development in Canada.** Adapted from Gladwin, et al., 2008.

—and came as a surprise to many. As Gladwin notes, “it just came out one day.” There had been no previous discussions within the Ministry of Education or consultation with school staff prior to the public announcement.

**Dr. Oberg’s initiative probably brought [the DPA policy] into process years earlier than it might otherwise have been.**

*Cathy Gladwin, MSc  
Alberta DPA Policy Researcher*

While the announcement may have been a shock, it was Dr. Oberg’s initiative that put DPA on the political agenda. Dr. Oberg was uniquely positioned to advance DPA given his roles as a physician and the Minister of Education. While Dr. Oberg certainly deserves credit as a DPA champion in Alberta, Gladwin notes that the changing political and social environments in the years prior to adoption were conducive to gain support and buy-in for the DPA policy. Based on her research, Gladwin has reason to believe that the government would have eventually adopted DPA, or a similar school physical activity policy, regardless of Dr. Oberg’s influence. However, Dr. Oberg’s role as a DPA champion and a public servant played a key role in fast-tracking the process.



Alberta Legislature Building, Wikimedia

### Policy Implementation in Schools: Jumping for Joy or Falling Flat?

Reflecting back on DPA implementation in Alberta, there have been a number of challenges and successes. In terms of challenges at the government policy level, early on there was confusion over policy reach and intent. The initial DPA announcement made by Dr. Oberg stated that DPA would be implemented in all schools, for all students. However, there was pushback from various stakeholders about the challenges of mandating 30 minutes of DPA in high schools as they follow a more structured timetable. As a result, the policy was then pared back to apply only to students in grades 1 to 9.



Another challenge faced during policy development was phrasing around policy intent and issue framing. DPA was initially framed as a strategy to address growing obesity rates and chronic diseases associated with decreased physical activity levels (Schools Come Alive, 2004). The goals were later refined to increase activity levels and promote healthy habits, in part to address chronic disease, but with a stronger connection to student learning benefits (Alberta Education, 2006).



Physical Activity in the Classroom, Wikimedia

When it came to implementation of DPA at the school level, teachers experienced challenges related to limited time, space, resources, and expertise. For example, some teachers felt that the classroom physical activity resources provided by the Ministry of Education were insufficient to promote moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity (MVPA). As Gladwin shared, “You’re not go-

ing to hit a higher level of fitness through cup stacking.” Further, during implementation, compromises were made to balance activities that used minimal equipment, space and set-up time, and activities that promoted MVPA and physical health benefits.

Another challenge in implementing DPA was the lack of consultation with teachers and school administrators prior to adopting the policy. Without their input, teachers and school administrators showed reluctance to buy-in to the policy. Ultimately, however, most teachers believed in the importance of regular physical activity and made an effort to implement DPA in their schools even with limited available resources.

**From the physical education purists’ point of view, some of the initiatives that were included in the daily physical activity [booklet] were a bit on the weaker side, especially when the initiative itself had been touted as a solution to the obesity problem.**

*Cathy Gladwin, MSc  
Alberta DPA Policy Researcher*

Despite the challenges, there have been many successes with DPA in Alberta. On a larger scale, the idea to target children’s health in the

school setting has been a key success. Students spend a large portion of their day at school, and school communities are important settings through which to create environments that support student health and well-being. In addition, the provision of resources to support DPA implementation, while limited, was helpful. Gladwin also noted that there have been successes at the local level with some elementary schools taking the initiative to hire physical education specialist teachers. Furthermore, some schools have offered a larger breadth and variety of activities that promote life-long physical activity habits, such as hip hop dance classes, circus activities, dragon boating, outdoor recreation, curling, golf, and yoga.

Ten years after adoption, the DPA policy in Alberta still has room for improvement. There has been no formal evaluation of DPA policy implementation or effectiveness, and anecdotally many teachers continue to struggle with implementation in their classrooms. However, over the years there has been a shift away from the focus on obesity and weight loss to considering wellness and the broader determinants of health to promote healthy school environments.



Children's Yoga Class, Flickr

# Key Lessons



- ♦ **Align Policy with Key Values and Beliefs:** Promoting health of children is a common value.
- ♦ **Consider the Social and Political Environment:** Is there an appetite for a new policy?
- ♦ **Identify Champions:** Dedicated leaders can help fast-track a policy by putting it on the political agenda.
- ♦ **Friends in High Places:** Political will plays a key role in government-level policy adoption.
- ♦ **Find Support:** Community organizations can support policy implementation.
- ♦ **Look for Opportunities and Open Policy Windows:** When one door closes, another one opens.
- ♦ **Think Beyond the Typical Policy Process:** Innovative policy may bypass traditional policy adoption models.
- ♦ **Include a Monitoring and Evaluation Plan at the Outset:** What does a 'successful' policy look like? How can we monitor and measure progress?

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