



Hosting Healthy Sporting Events: Alberta Schools' Athletic Association's Provincial Championships Nutrition Policy



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Alberta Schools' Athletic Association (ASAA) is a voluntary, non-profit organization that organizes high school sports provincial championships across Alberta (ASAA, 2015). The ASAA is comprised of 373 member high schools, which work together to establish ASAA policy related to hosting provincial championship events. Rooted in the belief that high school sporting events should have the best interest of student athletes in mind, in May 2015 the ASAA adopted the **Provincial Championships Nutrition Policy** (nutrition policy) to support healthy, active lifestyles for children and youth.

The nutrition policy applies to ASAA member schools who host provincial championships and specifies that hosts must ensure all food and beverages sold at ASAA provincial championship events fit within the 'Choose Most Often' and 'Choose Sometimes' categories of the *Alberta Nutritional Guidelines for Children and Youth* (ANGCY) (Alberta Health and Wellness, 2012). This story highlights the development of ASAA's nutrition policy and key lessons learned throughout the change process.

Nutrition Policy at Provincial Championship Events: An ASAA—EAS Collaboration

According to John Paton, Executive Director of the ASAA, the idea for developing a nutrition policy for Alberta provincial championship events first emerged in 2011 with leadership from Ever Active Schools (EAS). A provincial organization focused on promoting comprehensive school health, EAS is always looking for new ways to build healthier school communities. Through their work with schools, EAS noticed that while school sporting tournaments encouraged students to participate in physical activity, the food offered at these events was often unhealthy. With this in mind, during a joint meeting, EAS put forward a proposal to work with ASAA on a collaborative project to support the development of a nutrition policy in these settings (Ever Active Schools, 2012).

School sporting events are a good place to start because they're the most common events in a school involving physical activity, outside of school hours.

John Paton
Executive Director
Alberta Schools' Athletic Association



The timing of the meeting with EAS could not have been better as ASAA was already considering what they could do to improve the availability of healthy food and beverages at their events. As Paton notes, “what we were seeing was an awful lot of very poor food and beverage choices... everything from hotdogs, to fries and gravy, junk food snacks, and soft drinks.” Further, with the recent implementation of mandated school nutrition policies across various school boards in Alberta, ASAA was beginning to mull over the role that policy could play in addressing the issue. Armed with funding from the Alberta Healthy School Communities Wellness Fund and high-level connections throughout the province, EAS was the right partner to help turn the idea into a reality. With this in mind, ASAA agreed to partner with EAS in 2011 (Ever Active Schools, 2012).



High School Basketball Game
Wikimedia Commons

Hosting Healthy Sporting Events: A Pilot Project

The ASAA-EAS partnership started in late 2011 with a pilot project, entitled *Hosting Healthy Sporting Events* (HHSE). The aim of this pilot was to support the promotion of healthier foods sold and served at Alberta school sporting events (Ever Active Schools, 2016). To accomplish this aim, the team initiated the HHSE project to explore readiness for a nutrition policy at ASAA provincial championships. This pilot involved two phases:

- **Phase 1a:** Headed by EAS, the team assessed key stakeholder perceptions regarding a mandated policy that would require hosts to sell exclusively healthy food options in provincial championship concessions. To assess readiness for a nutrition policy, the team administered an online survey to teachers, coaches, and athletic directors in Alberta (Ever Active Schools, 2012). Overall, the survey results illustrated support for a provincial championships nutrition policy. For example, 76% of teachers, athletic directors, volunteers, and coaches indicated that they would support a mandated nutrition policy in their school sporting events (Ever Active Schools, 2012).

Phase 1b: Feasibility Testing

In addition to the online survey, in 2012 EAS and ASAA tested the feasibility of the nutrition policy at two provincial championships: one at Camrose Composite High School and one at Clear Water Academy in Calgary. The team worked with the school hosts, tracked healthy and unhealthy food sales at concessions and canteens, administered student surveys, and handed out promotional materials to help students make healthy eating choices (Ever Active Schools, 2012). The goal of this phase was to gauge the feasibility and readiness for a nutrition policy by providing support and resources to school hosts. Through these activities, EAS and ASAA learned valuable lessons that would inform their future efforts.

Phase 2: Focus Group Discussions

Building on the results of the survey and the feasibility testing, in 2013, EAS and ASAA conducted focus group discussions with teachers, athletic directors, and health promotion coordinators from Edmonton, Red Deer, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Their goal was to flush out challenges and successes related to the promotion of healthy food and beverage sales in the school environment (Ever Active Schools, 2013). The focus group discussions provided ideas, solutions, and sharing of best practices to address barriers associated with the implementation of Alberta school nutrition policies. The focus group discussions informed the

development of an online toolkit. The toolkit included sample menus, recipe ideas, and successful stories of nutrition policy change in schools and sporting events.

Overall, the ASAA and EAS' HHSE pilot project established readiness for a provincial championship nutrition policy and helped identify factors that support or create barriers to change. As noted by Katelynn Theal, Project Coordinator for EAS, the HHSE pilot project was a key component of the change process, helping to build a case for policy action as a feasible next step.

Policy Development: A Committee is Assembled

The HHSE pilot results indicated that the development of a nutrition policy in ASAA provincial championship events was supported by school officials, coaches, teachers, and athletic directors. As such, ASAA and EAS determined that moving forward with a mandated healthy eating nutrition policy was the appropriate next step. With this in mind, at the ASAA Annual General Meeting in 2014, Brian Torrance of EAS spoke to the ASAA Board of Governors to propose the formulation of a nutrition policy in provincial championships. During the meeting, Paton recalls that the ASAA Board of Governors unanimously agreed to take action to improve the nutritional quality of food offered in ASAA provincial championship events.

With the green light from the ASAA Board of Governors, Paton assembled a committee to assess what could be done to improve the availability of healthy food and beverages in provincial championships. The committee included ASAA staff, school member representatives, Alberta Health Services (AHS) dietitians, and EAS representatives. Building on the HHSE project, the committee decided to move ahead with developing a nutrition policy that would require school hosts to provide exclusively healthy food and beverage options.

In drafting the policy, the committee examined existing school nutrition policies in Alberta. In particular, committee members from Calgary brought up the Calgary Board of Education's nutrition policy, which follows the ANGCY. With this information, the committee modelled the ASAA nutrition policy after the Calgary Board of Education's policy and used the ANGCY as the guideline for defining healthy food and beverages. After positive discussions, the committee came up with a comprehensive nutrition policy that states:

All food and beverages sold and provided at ASAA provincial championship events held in ASAA member school facilities must fit within the 'Choose Most Often' and 'Choose Sometimes' categories of the ANGCY (ASAA, 2015).

Paton and Theal note that the development of the policy was "easy, smooth, and seamless" because of all the background work that was done beforehand. They also give credit to the value of existing school board nutrition policies and the ANGCY in supporting the process.



*Ever Active's Online Toolkit
Available at www.everactive.org/toolkit*

Policy Adoption: Student First

With final wording of the nutrition policy complete, in 2015 an ASAA executive presented the policy to the ASAA Board of Governors (Board) at the ASAA Annual General Meeting. After the reach and intent of the policy was explained, the Board was asked to make a decision. During discussion of the policy, some stakeholders voiced resistance, suggesting that adopting the nutrition policy may lead to loss of profits for provincial championship hosts. On the other side of the coin, arguments for the nutrition policy focused on making student health and well-being a top priority. As an organization that operates for the benefit of students, ASAA members agreed that adopting the nutrition policy would align with their beliefs of supporting student health. So, despite some concerns, ASAA Board of Governors voted in favour of adopting the nutrition policy in ASAA's official policy handbook on May 2015.

Policy Implementation: Facing Roadblocks and Barriers

The ASAA experienced a number of challenges and successes in implementing the policy. Initially, the ASAA's plan was for the policy to be mandatory and implemented in all provincial championship events hosted in ASAA member schools for the 2015-2016 school year. However, Paton and the ASAA team soon began to experience push back from some school hosts. For example, some school hosts cited potential loss of revenue from concessions and greater costs associated with preparing healthy food as major barriers to policy implementation. In addition, others voiced concerns regarding inadequate kitchen space or equipment and the lack of volunteer support to implement the above policy.

With the feedback in mind, the ASAA stepped back from making the nutrition policy mandatory for the 2015-2016 school year. Instead, they took on a supportive role in helping school hosts make smaller changes to concession food offerings. This entailed providing school hosts with resources and information on how to make the switch to offering healthy food. For example, ASAA staff utilized resources, such as the EAS online toolkit, the ANGCY, and other tools from AHS, to help school hosts implement the nutrition policy.

Additional challenges faced during policy implementation included inconsistencies in local

school policies and the level of control school hosts had over their concession. Paton notes that it has been particularly difficult to tell school hosts to follow the ASAA's nutrition policy if their school district did not have a nutrition policy in place. Further, although some school hosts wanted to implement the nutrition policy, those that do not operate their own concession had limited control over the food sold during their provincial championship events. Some of these concession contractors were happy to comply with the policy, while others were less flexible.

Despite the challenges, there have been many successes. Paton cites the support they received from the ASAA Board in developing and adopting the provincial championship nutrition policy and buy in from school hosts as key successes. According to Paton and his team, the adoption of the ASAA nutrition policy is, itself, an accomplishment. Indeed, the approval of the nutrition policy from ASAA decision-makers is confirmation that awareness and understanding of the value of promoting student health is gaining momentum.



High School Football Game, Wikimedia Commons

Moreover, although policy implementation is still in its early stages, ASAA staff members have received praise from student athletes and their families for the policy. A number of school hosts have also welcomed the new policy and have successfully served healthy food and beverages at their championship events.

Moving Forward: Too Early to Tell

The ASAA nutrition policy is still at the infancy stage in terms of the policy change process. Much work remains in terms of improving the nutritional quality of food offered in Alberta's school provincial championships. However, with the support of EAS, the ASAA remain committed to the policy and are taking steps towards facilitating greater policy compliance among school hosts.

Key Lessons



- ◆ **Remember your end goal and purpose.** “Always remember that our reason for existing is to provide a great opportunity for kids to experience physical activity in the sporting realm, outside of the school day, in an atmosphere and environment that’s both healthy and safe. Make sure not to shy away from that, because it’s the right thing to do,” says John Paton.
- ◆ **Find support.** Developing partnerships with well-connected health promotion organizations, such as EAS, can provide much needed support throughout the policy change process.
- ◆ **Change takes time.** Recognize that change is a continuous process and will not happen overnight. As Paton says, “it’s not going to come easy and it’s not going to come quickly. Remember that it’s not all going to come in one year, one tournament.”
- ◆ **Keep expectations realistic.** Set realistic goals, keeping in mind that the policy change process is not always smooth. “Temper the expectations and just keep on working towards that end goal” says Paton. “You’re going to go through the challenges, you’re going to go through the heartaches.”
- ◆ **Communication is essential.** Keep an open line of communication with partners and key stakeholders. “Communicating your goals to your hosts and your membership, making sure that everyone knows where [the change] is coming from. That’s going to hopefully get people to buy-in and prevent some of those more challenging discussions from happening down the road” says John Paton.



For More Information:

John Paton
Executive Director
Alberta Schools' Athletic
Association
(780) 427-8182
john@asaa.ca

Katelynn Theal
Provincial Projects Coordinator
Ever Active Schools
(780) 454-4745
katelynn@everactive.org

For more information on the Hosting Healthy Sporting Events Project, please visit: <http://www.everactive.org/hosting-healthy-sporting-events> and <http://www.asaa.ca/afc>.

Read ASAA's nutrition policy here: <http://www.asaa.ca/resources/asaa-bylaws-policy>.

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