

Healthy Schools Forum
The Honourable Shirley Bond
Minister of Health Services and Deputy Premier
January 14, 2005

Check Against Delivery

Good morning. I am so delighted to be here today. Just a few minutes ago, one of the students said, "I wish we had a chance to have that at our school." And that's great to hear. It's exactly what we're here today to talk about.

I bring you greetings on behalf of the Premier of the province. I know he would have loved to be here today. Healthy schools are a huge part of what he thinks is important for British Columbia.

This forum is quite unprecedented. It's just wonderful to look around the room, because there's nearly a hundred educators, health professionals, parents, students, non-government organizations and business people present. And all of you are staunch advocates for students and their health and education. I'm also pleased to welcome a number of my colleagues here today to join me. These are people who care enormously about students but also about being healthy in British Columbia.

I won't spend a lot of time talking about the Minister of Education, Tom Christensen, because he's going to come up shortly and you'll have a chance to meet him. His Ministry, the Ministry of Education, is co-sponsoring this forum with mine, the Ministry of Health Services.

I know that there are also MLAs here who are members of the select standing committees of health and education. In particular I want to recognize some of my good friends: Val Roddick who is here from Delta South; Richard Stewart, who managed to get a drink out of the vending machine already, from Coquitlam-Maillardville; Lorne Mayencourt will be joining us later this morning; an enormous presence in our caucus and someone who always raises issues around youth, family and children is Reverend Val Anderson, from Vancouver-Langara; Katherine Whittred is here from North Vancouver; and Randy Hawes who works very hard as an advocate for youth and children, is here from Maple-Ridge-Mission. Lastly, someone who works tirelessly to promote health in British Columbia schools is our provincial health officer, Dr. Perry Kendall.

Every person in this room shares a vision - for British Columbia schools to be the best place in the world for children to learn, to grow and to be healthy. Our goal for our province is to increase the proportion of people who are more active and eating more nutritiously by 20 per cent before the Olympics in 2010. That work began last November when Premier Gordon Campbell announced our \$15.5 million plan to make B.C. students the healthiest in Canada.

He, along with Minister Christensen and Minister Hansen, had a wonderful time participating in an *Action Schools! BC* energy-blast. I understand we're going to get to participate in some of those activities later today. What a fantastic program *Action Schools! BC* is. Minister Christensen warns me that now that I'm the Minister of Health Services, I'm going to be doing a lot more of those activity energy-blast things. They've already got me hooked up to a pedometer and they're counting the number of steps I do every day.

But behind the fun activities that we're going to participate in - not just today but in schools throughout BC - there is a very serious issue. That is the health and well-being of our children. Results of the Action Schools B.C. study revealed some startling numbers about the health of B.C.'s children: 58 per cent of youth in British Columbia are not active enough to benefit their growth and development - a staggering percentage. At the beginning of the study, 37 per cent of boys and 24 per cent of girls were either overweight or obese. The most startling result of all: 55 per cent of our young people have at least one cardiovascular disease risk factor. That's not what we want for our children.

I am a mom and luckily enough, my children are now adult children. But throughout the course of our lives and experiences, being healthy and active was a very important part of what helped them become the young adults they are today. My daughter was a dancer, and my son was a hockey player. They were twins, and it was interesting that that's the roles they chose: my daughter chose dance; my son chose hockey. We spent a lot of time paying attention to being healthy and being active. That has really paid off for them.

Less physical activity and an increase in obesity among children and youth is and should be a major public concern. We know that these factors increase the risk of chronic conditions such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease later in life. The good news is we know the risks and we can, together, make a difference.

Children who participated in Action Schools B.C. over the last year got healthier. Research from the pilot study shows that the fitness level for children who participated doubled over those who did not.

We know a good thing when we see one. That's why in November the Premier announced the expansion of the Action Schools B.C. model. I am very happy to say that the reaction has been phenomenal. As of the end of December 430 elementary schools had registered to become an action school. Isn't that fantastic? 430 elementary schools!

Some of the other commitments that our Premier announced include an action plan to increase healthier choices in school vending machines.

We know that the school-age years are an absolutely critical time for establishing patterns of healthy living that we hope last for a lifetime. Healthy, active children are more likely to become healthy, active adults. There are lots of parents in the room today, and I'm one of them. We all want our children to have absolutely the best possible start in life. Students, too, are eager to take on the challenge. I was delighted to meet with the students a bit earlier. It's just great to hear what they're doing.

Lorne was telling me that this isn't a project that started in their school after the government thought about it - they actually started it years ago. Students themselves were concerned about being healthier, as were their parents. They started this initiative long before government got the idea. That's usually the way it works, isn't it? I was inspired by their enthusiasm, and I'm very impressed by their ideas, and I know they're going to share them with you today. It's important for them, and it's important for us, and the broader community, as well.

We have some great examples, already, being set in B.C. schools. Let's look at Spring Valley Middle School in Kelowna. Parents and teachers asked students for input about food they wanted in their school. The students removed 15 poor food choices from a list of 100, and they circled the 15 healthier choices they wanted in the cafeteria. School staff then worked with their vendor to sell only the food that made the final list. The great news: students are not leaving the school grounds to buy less healthy food, and the cafeteria is still making a profit. Those are the kind of examples that should inspire all of us.

Throughout the next few hours I look forward to hearing your ideas for a truly healthy school environment. Your work today will be a catalyst for a fresh, energized approach to child health. The results of the work that we do here today will generate even more ideas and more excitement about what can be achieved.

I'm lucky. I work with a team of people in Victoria, and we have a Premier that has a passion for health and for the youth of this province. I know that he's going to be asking Tom and I for a report of today's event, and we will be happy to do that. We have a goal. We want B.C. to be the healthiest province in Canada. I'm so glad that you're here today to help us continue the work that we've set along that path.

Thank you very much for inviting us and for being here with us today.