

SUPPORTING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOOD & BODY IN ELK ISLAND CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

*Developed in consultation with the Body Image Research Lab of the University of Calgary,
Alberta Health Services, and Pine Health.*

*For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you
because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful. I know that full well.*

Psalm 139: 13-14

Background:

Elk Island Catholic Schools (EICS) supports staff and student wellbeing in a faith-filled environment that is caring and inclusive. EICS recognizes nutrition as an essential element of student and staff wellness, and acknowledges its role in optimal growth and development. We are committed to creating nutrition environments in schools that are supportive of learning, growth, body image, and a positive relationship with food. EICS acknowledges the complex nature of nutrition, and applies an approach that considers the interconnection between food, school environment (physical and social), culture, and overall [wellbeing](#). Weight-neutral or weight-inclusive approaches emphasize improving individuals' relationships with food. It prioritizes one's emotional and physical wellbeing over the pursuit of a lower weight, and criticizes the discrimination that may be experienced by people with diverse bodies. (Dugmore et al., 2020).

A weight-neutral approach to wellbeing has been found to support multiple dimensions of health and protect against the risk of disordered eating and eating disorders.

Moving towards this vision of weight-neutral wellbeing is a process that can take time; be kind to yourself and others as you learn more. *(This vision was developed in collaboration with the Body Image Research Lab and Elk Island Catholic Schools.)*

Schools and educators play an important role in helping students develop a positive mindset around food and overall well-being. This Administrative Procedure was developed to establish a culture that aligns with the following concepts:

Our Vision for Weight-Neutral Wellbeing in the School Setting

School & Workplace Culture

- Everyone feels welcome and included. People can expect that their bodies will not be talked about in the school community.
- Body diversity is accepted and celebrated in words and in action.
- Students and staff are valued for their unique strengths, talents, and contributions and not for their appearance.

- Our collective understanding of health is that it is multidimensional and that weight and health are not simplistically linked.
- Lesson materials, media resources, and visuals in the school positively depict bodies of different size, shape, race, ability, and gender.
- Students are not weighed at school (including fitness and sport contexts)
- Schools are safe places for those who may struggle with weight-related issues.
- Schools and workplaces are free from diet talk and discussions of weight loss.
- Proactive practices and corrective policies are in place to eliminate weight-based teasing and bullying.
- Wellbeing is cooperative and collective, not competitive and individual.
- School wellness initiatives focus on everyone feeling better from a multidimensional perspective rather than individual activities tracking movement or eating.

Physical Activity

- Physical activity is an opportunity for collective joy.
- Physical activity is promoted as an embodied way to feel well, be outdoors, and connect with others and not as a means to lose weight or change our appearance.
- Physical activity is an opportunity for learning and refining sport specific movement skills
- Physical activity is an opportunity to build life skills and character skills

Food Environment

- Food is celebrated as a source of connection and **spiritual** or cultural tradition.
- In staff rooms, classrooms, and common areas, people feel safe to eat their food without judgment or commentary.
- Conversations and student learning activities are free from talk of calories, portion sizes, macros, grams, BMI, or pounds. Curricular outcomes must be met and can be approached with sensitivity.
- Staff create a positive and calm eating environment that strives to be free from screens and distractions so everyone can eat according to their own body cues.
- Students feel supported in choosing what and how much to eat of their food, and in the order they choose.
- Staff respect the food choices families make.

Roles

Students spend a lot of their time at school and therefore it is important that schools are a setting for promoting health and wellbeing. Food is important for our physical, mental, social and spiritual health. It is often part of our cultural traditions and social wellbeing as a means to connect with others. [We all have a different role](#) in creating positive food environments that support holistic wellbeing. See [Nurturing Healthy Eaters in Elementary School](#) & [Nurturing Healthy Eaters Secondary School](#) for more information.

What it means for EICS:

We commit to the following roles:

Division Level Administrators will...

- Provide professional development opportunities for staff related to promoting a healthy relationship with food and weight-neutral health promotion
- Continue to update administrative procedures to reflect current best practices

- Support schools in assessing and implementing practices that build positive social and physical environments that support positive relationships with food, and reduce body-based comments and bullying (e.g. weight-based teasing), ways to reduce weight-based stigmatization, etc.
- Model positive practices and language consistent with Appendix A: Language is Powerful
- School Administrators will...
 - Communicate with staff, students, food providers, parents and volunteers about the weight-neutral wellbeing approach to food environments
 - Provide learning opportunities for staff. Topics to be explored may include food literacy, health messaging, behaviours around food, weight-bias, and body image
 - Create comfortable eating environments that provide opportunities to build social connection and support physical attunement to body cues
 - Adequately address weight-based stigmatization and bullying
 - Model positive practices and language consistent with [Appendix A: Language is Powerful](#)
- Cafeteria and canteen staff will...
 - Help to create a calm, safe, and pleasant eating environment where students can enjoy eating and socializing with their peers
 - Make nutritious foods available, visible, and affordable
 - Refer to and follow details outlined in the EICS Food Provision Guidelines
- Parents/guardians will...
 - Make decisions on what foods to serve their child
 - Honour other families' decisions about food and only provide food for their child(ren)
- Students will ...
 - Decide what and how much to eat, based on what's available and by listening to their natural hunger and fullness cues
 - Honor the dignity of their peers and school staff
 - Respect the food choices of others
- School staff will...
 - Model positive practices and language consistent with [Appendix A: Language is Powerful](#)
 - Promote body diversity by representing a variety of shapes and sizes in materials and images around the school and classroom, e.g., resources, books, classroom materials
 - Provide nutrition education that encourages students to explore food, where food comes from, food and culture, and develop age-appropriate food skills
 - Participate in professional learning opportunities that explore weight-neutral health promotion and development of food literacy
 - Avoid learning activities that can be harmful and reinforce diet culture.

- o The following activities can contribute to disordered eating/eating disorders and should be avoided:
 - Talking about weight/weight loss
 - Discussing diet regimens
 - Numeric discussion around food (e.g. counting calories, grams of sugar, grams of carbs)
 - Weighing, measuring or anthropometric (BMI) assessment of students in any context

- o PLEASE NOTE; Provide support for students with medical concerns. *Teachers will assist students in tracking to support specific medical concerns including support to manage blood sugar levels.*

- School Councils will:
 - o Consider weight-neutral approaches to planning events

All Bodies are Welcomed & Celebrated

People are diverse. No one person is the same as another, and everyone should be celebrated for who they are.

What this means for EICS:

- Building a culture that is inclusive of all body shapes, sizes, abilities, genders, races, and cultures
- Addressing weight and size-based stigmatization and acknowledging the damaging impact this has on overall health and wellbeing. Find more information on [Mental Health and Weight Bias in Schools](#)
- Promoting body diversity through our language, messaging. Examples include:
 - o Honouring the dignity of the human person and how each of us has been made in the image and likeness of God.
 - o Variations in body size, composition, type, and shape are part of the natural diversity of people
 - o Body weight, shape or size does not define our health or ability.
 - o No one person is better than another.
 - o All people belong.

A comprehensive approach to the school environment.

A whole school approach supports strategies that go beyond food provision and considers other actions and activities that support healthy school environments for all.

What it means for EICS:

- Create positive physical and social atmospheres during meal times
 - o Example supports include creating spaces to eat with proper seating, [designing spaces](#) to eat with peers, not eating in front of screens, allotting enough time to eat and minimizing loud noises and distractions.
- Respect the role of individual choice and the role parents/caregivers play in providing food to their own children

- Recognize that all foods can be part of a lifestyle that promotes a healthy relationship with food.
- Promote water as the drink of choice throughout our schools
 - Example activities include encouraging the use of water bottles in classrooms and having drinking fountains available in schools
- Canteens and cafeterias offer a variety of foods and follow the [EICS Food Provision Guidelines](#).
- Enhance school culture and celebrations with activities that go beyond food by emphasizing music, art, activities and connections with others.
- Promote non-food rewards. See [Appendix B](#) for information on Non-Food Rewards.
 - Non-food rewards are inclusive of individuals with food allergies and sensitivities
 - Non-food rewards can be more meaningful and unifying
 - Non-food rewards create less waste and possible cleanup for caretakers
- Use images and resources that reflect a variety of people, reflective of various body shapes, sizes, abilities, genders, races, and cultures
- Schools receiving grant funding for breakfast, lunch or snack programs are accountable to meet the requirements provided by the grant funding organization.

Appendix A: Language is Powerful

Instead of...	Try to...	Because
<p>Using polarizing, fear-based and judgemental language around food and health and chronic disease development.</p> <p>Example: If you eat too much sugar you will get diabetes.</p>	<p>Focus on what can be gained from healthy eating behaviours including making choices that reflect taste, culture, food access, and lifestyle.</p>	<p>Positive messages can lead to increased acceptance and integration of health messaging into everyday behaviours and wellness practices</p> <p>https://www.azhealthzone.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/style-guide-language-of-health.pdf</p>
<p>Labeling food in ways that are moralizing and dichotomizing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Good vs bad o Healthy vs unhealthy o Whole vs ultra-processed o Colour rating systems: red, yellow, green o Referring to foods as “clean” o Using the term “junk food” 	<p>Talk about food from a neutral perspective, e.g., using the name of foods when describing foods instead of “treat”</p>	<p>Language around food is powerful. Food does not have moral value.</p>
<p>Making comments about what others are eating (colleagues or students), that either directly or indirectly implies moral judgment</p>	<p>Talk about hobbies, interests, and other events. If food does come up, use neutral, descriptive language.</p>	<p>Food choices are individual and based on taste, preference, culture, food access, and lifestyle. Healthy eating looks different for everyone.</p> <p>Talking about the food choices of others can promote food-related guilt or shame. It is not the role of educators to monitor what students are eating.</p> <p>Depending on their age, students may not be making food choices.</p>
<p>Focusing on numbers related to food (e.g., counting calories, grams of sugar, grams of carbohydrates) or body</p>	<p>Promote attuned self-care and listening to our bodies”</p>	<p>Concern with numbers is an external influence that can interfere with our ability to listen to our body.</p>

weight (e.g., calculating BMI).		
<p>Discussing weight, weight loss, diet regimens, eating disorders, disordered eating or implying that certain body shapes or sizes are better than others.</p>	<p>Create weight-neutral and body neutral environments by considering language, materials/teaching tools, and the activities offered to students</p>	<p>Taking a weight-neutral approach can help students of all body sizes feel like they belong and are accepted.</p> <p>Weight should be decoupled from health. Health behaviours can be/are practiced by people of all body sizes.</p> <p>Discussing eating disorders or disordered eating can inadvertently glamourize the behaviours associated with them.</p> <p>O’dea J. School-based interventions to prevent eating problems: First do no harm. 2000. Eating disorders; 8:2, 123-130, DOI: 10.1080/10640260008251219</p> <p>https://www.nedc.com.au/assets/NEDC-Resources/NEDC-Resource-Schools.pdf</p>
<p>Framing physical activity as something that needs to be endured to compensate for food intake, appearance and weight loss, etc.</p> <p>Being active for your health (as the only reason)</p>	<p>Decouple eating and physical activity.</p> <p>Focus on what can be gained from physical activity and any type of movement, rather than the extrinsic reasons (appearance), for pursuing physical activity</p>	<p>Energy regulation is more complex than “energy/calories in – energy/calories out”</p> <p>There are many reasons to be physically active, such as enjoyment, improved sleep, lower risk for depression and anxiety, more time for self-care, increase in energy, etc.</p> <p>https://www.azhealthzone.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/style-guide-language-of-health.pdf</p>

Appendix B: Non-Food Rewards

Get creative when it comes to food-free theme days, cultural events, and class milestones. Try music, art, physical activity, and other relationship-building activities. Here are some great alternatives for food-free seasonal celebrations:

Examples of Non-Food Rewards

- Choosing a class activity
- Read or have class outdoors
- Extra recess
- Social rewards (e.g. attention, praise, thanks, etc.)
- Traditional games or dances to mark significant cultural dates
- A phone call or note home to parents commending a child's accomplishment
- Going first in line
- Teachers' assistant
- Sit by a friend or in a special seat next to or at the teacher's desk
- Read to a younger class
- Listening to music while working
- Make deliveries to the office
- "Free choice" time at the end of the day
- Opportunity to lead the class in an activity or "teach"
- Helping in another class
- Eating lunch with a teacher or principal
- Class "party" (e.g. pajama day, stuffie day, jersey day, hat day, movie afternoon)
- [Click here](#) for more non-food reward ideas

Appendix C: Resources

Definition of Weight Neutral Wellbeing:

Dugmore, J. A., Copeland G. W., Hannah, E. N., & Bauer, J. (2020). Effects of weight-neutral approaches compared with traditional weight-loss approaches on behavioral, physical, and psychological health outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Nutrition Reviews*, 78(1), 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.1093/nutrit/nuz020>

Intuitive Eating

<https://www.intuitiveeating.org/10-principles-of-intuitive-eating/>

Health At Every Size

<https://asdah.org/health-at-every-size-haes-approach/>

Ontario Dietitians in Public Health Nurturing Healthy Eaters Elementary

<https://www.odph.ca/upload/membership/document/2019-12/nurturing-healthy-eaters-elementary-schools.pdf>

Nurturing Healthy Eaters Secondary

<https://www.odph.ca/upload/membership/document/2019-12/nurturing-healthy-eaters-secondary-schools.pdf>

Mental Health and Weight Bias in Schools

<https://www.odph.ca/upload/membership/document/2020-10/3756-mental-health-and-weight-bias-in-schools.pdf>

Dairy Farmers of Canada Let's Talk About Food

<https://dairyfarmersofcanada.ca/sites/default/files/2021-08/Lets%20Talk%20About%20Food%20-%20EN%20-%20digital%20asset.pdf>

Ellyn Satter Institute (ESI). Children and their eating: Guidelines on school nutrition. [Internet] 2014 [cited 2021 Dec 24. Available from:

<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Handout-ChildrentheirEating-School-Nutrition-2014.pdf>

Ellyn Satter Institute (ESI). Healthy eating at school. [Internet] 2018 [cited 2021 Dec 24]. Available from:

<https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Handout-Healthy-eating-at-school.pdf>

Teach Food First: An Educator's Toolkit - HealthySchools BC

<https://healthyschoolsbc.ca/teach-food-first/>

National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC)

- [NEDIC | home](#)
- [Webinar: Supporting teachers with positive body image and eating disorder prevention - YouTube](#)
- [Supporting teachers: positive body image and eating disorder prevention - Part II - YouTube](#)

Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre

<https://keltyeatingdisorders.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Understanding-Eating-Disorders-in-Schools.pdf>

National Eating Disorders Collaboration
[Eating Disorders in Schools: Prevention, Early Identification and Response](#) (2020)

References:

- [UConn Rudd Center](#)
- [Piran, N. \(2004\). Teachers: On "being" \(rather than "doing"\) prevention. *Eating Disorders*, 12, 1-9.](#)
- [Nutter, S., Ireland, A., Alberga, A. S., Brun, I., Lefebvre, D., Hayden, K. A., & Russell-Mayhew, S. \(2019\). Weight bias in educational settings: A systematic review. *Current Obesity Reports*, 8, 185-200.](#)
- [Health at Every Size in the school setting](#)
- [Ellyn Satter Institute](#)
- [Tribole, E. & Resch, E. \(2020\). *Intuitive eating* \(4th ed.\) St. Martin's Press.](#)

Appendix D: Mental Health Resources

Clinical and community services	
Primary Care Network Sherwood Park Strathcona County Mental Health Programs and Support	https://www.sherwoodparkpcn.com/programs-and-classes/mental-health-support
Alberta Health Services Addiction and Mental Health	https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/amh/amh.aspx
CASA - Child, Adolescent, and Family Mental Health	https://www.casaservices.org/
Strathcona County Family and Community Services	https://www.strathcona.ca/council-county/administration-departments/family-and-community-services/ 780-464-4044
Elk Island Catholic Schools list of mental health resources	https://www.eics.ab.ca/coronavirus-information-in-eics/parent-resources
Distress and Crisis Resources (24/7)	
Emergency services	Dial 911
Alberta Health Services Mental Health Crisis Line/Distress Centers	Toll-free: 1-877-303-2642 Toll-free for 780 area code: 1-800-482-4357
Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Helpline	CMHA Distress Line: 780-482-4357 CMHA Rural Distress Line: 1-800-232-7288
Organizations	
Psychologists' Association of Alberta (referrals)	https://psychologistsassociation.ab.ca/referrals/
Canadian Mental Health Association	https://cinha.ca
Canadian Psychological Association	https://cpa.ca
Eating Disorder Support Network of Alberta	https://edsna.ca/