



October 24, 2025

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Re. [HL28.1](#): Working with Schools to Improve the Health and Well-being of Children and Youth

As environment and health-focused advocacy organizations, the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) Ontario chapter and the Canadian Environmental Law Association welcomes the report from the Medical Officer of Health on “Working with Schools to Improve the Health and Well-being of Children and Youth.” Collaboration between Toronto Public Health and Toronto’s four school boards through the Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy is clearly delivering necessary services to Toronto’s students, including immunization programs, mental health supports, substance use prevention, vision health, sexual health, and healthy nutritious food through the expanded school nutrition program.

All of these services are improving student health, but there is an additional health challenge that the Board must take into account as it begins planning the next Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy for 2027: the health impacts of climate change. The climate crisis has been recognized by the world’s leading health organizations as the single biggest threat to human health, with children among the most vulnerable.¹ Toronto’s students are already experiencing the impacts with more days of extreme heat, wildfire smoke pollution, and disruptions from extreme weather. Given that these impacts are projected to worsen, it is time for Toronto’s school boards and public health unit to collaborate on strategies to address climate health harms to students.

There is a growing body of research on the physical and mental health impacts of fossil fuel-driven climate change on young people. Because children’s minds and bodies are still developing, they are more vulnerable to climate-related hazards such as heat and air pollution

¹ World Health Organization. “Climate Change.” World Health Organization, World Health Organization: WHO, 9 Aug. 2019, www.who.int/health-topics/climate-change; Public Health Agency of Canada. *Chief Public Health Officer of Canada’s Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2022: Mobilizing Public Health Action on Climate Change in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: Public Health Agency of Canada; 2022.

and more at risk of developing lasting health problems as a result.² The climate-related impacts that are already affecting the health of young people in Toronto include:

- Wildfire smoke pollution, which has been identified as particularly dangerous because of its toxic mix of gases and fine particulate matter (PM2.5), can affect children's respiratory, cardiovascular and neurological systems.³ Wildfire smoke also exacerbates asthma which is now the leading cause of school absenteeism and hospitalizations across Canada.⁴
- Extreme heat events which can cause heat exhaustion and heat stroke in children and exacerbate existing health problems such as asthma and heart conditions. It can also lead to slowed cognition, learning difficulties and behaviour challenges.⁵
- Risk of insect- and tick-borne diseases such as Lyme disease and West Nile virus which is increasing as the duration of transmission seasons grows due to warming temperatures.⁶
- Extreme flood events which can result in displacement, disrupted learning, increased risk of psychological distress, including post-traumatic stress disorder; and physical health harms associated with mould from flood damaged buildings.⁷
- Mental health distress and fear for the future as the climate crisis accelerates. In a recent survey of Canadian youth, 78% reported that climate change was impacting their overall mental health and 37% reported that their feelings about climate change was negatively impacting their daily functioning.⁸

² Irena Buka and Katherine M. Shea; *Global climate change and health in Canadian children*, Canadian Paediatric Society, *Paediatric Environmental Health Section Paediatric Child Health* 2019 24(8); Malak, Mohamed., et al. "Climate Change and Child Wellbeing: A Systematic Evidence and Gap Map on Impacts, Mitigation, and Adaptation." *The Lancet Planetary Health*, vol. 9, no. 4, Apr. 2025, pp. e337–e346, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2542-5196\(25\)00061-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2542-5196(25)00061-0).

³ Luciana V. Rizzo and Maria Cândida F.V. Rizzo. "Wildfire Smoke and Health Impacts: A Narrative Review." *Jornal de Pediatria*, vol. 101, Supplement 1, 13 Dec. 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jped.2024.11.006>

⁴ "Asthma at School." *Asthma Canada*, asthma.ca/; Canadian Institute for Health Information, Canadian Lung Association, Health Canada, Statistics Canada. *Respiratory Disease in Canada*. Health Canada; 2001:118.

⁵ Health Canada. *Keep Children Cool! Protect Your Child from Extreme Heat*, 2024 <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/keep-children-cool-extreme-heat.html>; M. A. Folkerts et al. "Care provider assessment of thermal state of children

in day-care centers." *Building and Environment*, 179, July 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.buildenv.2020.106915>

⁶ Nick Ogden, et. al., "Infectious Diseases," In P. Berry & R. Schnitter (Eds.), *Health of Canadians in a Changing Climate: Advancing our Knowledge for Action*. Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada, 2022. <https://changingclimate.ca/site/assets/uploads/sites/5/2021/11/6-INFECTIOUS-DISEASES-CHAPTER-EN.pdf>

⁷ Nicole Glenn and Maxine Myer. "Post-Flooding Community-Level Psychosocial Impacts and Priorities in Canada: A Preliminary Report" National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health, NCCEH - CCSNE, Nov, 2022. nccch.ca/resources/evidence-reviews/post-flooding-community-level-psychosocial-impacts-and-priorities-canada

⁸ Lindsay P. Galway and Ellen Field. "Climate Emotions and Anxiety among Young People in Canada: A National Survey and Call to Action." *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, vol. 9, no. 100204, Jan. 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2023.100204>

As the health-related impacts of climate change in the Toronto area are only expected to worsen, it is clear that action must be taken to protect students' health and well-being.⁹ For students from historically marginalized communities, including Indigenous, racialized and low-income communities, who are already impacted by health inequities, the need for action is even greater.

The Board of Health has taken significant steps toward addressing the issue of climate change and public health. In 2023, the Board supported the development of a framework for monitoring and understanding the health impacts of climate change in Toronto.¹⁰ In addition, in July of this year, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to partner with academics, community researchers, City divisions and others to assess the feasibility of research on health-related behavioural impacts that contribute to adaptation and resilience to climate change.¹¹ As children and youth will bear the biggest health burden from climate change, it is now incumbent on the Board of Health to ensure that their health concerns in particular are addressed by ensuring that plans to address climate-related health impacts on students are included in the next Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy. In doing so, the Board of Health would strengthen and complement the work on climate and health that they have already committed to and initiate the important work of protecting the health and well-being of Toronto's student population from climate harms.

Accordingly, we urge the Board to support collaboration between Toronto Public Health and the school boards on the development of the next Toronto Healthy School Strategy with particular attention to:

- Collecting data to track climate-related impacts on students' mental and physical health in order to identify and assess students' needs and inform the development of school board health policies.
- Collecting data to identify the climate-related harms students may be facing on school property. Data collection should include: measuring indoor and outdoor temperatures;

⁹ S. Lam, et. al. *Toronto's Current and Future Climate*. Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. Toronto, ON, 2024. See also, Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and the Environment, "A Collective Call for Action to Protect Children from Extreme Heat In Schools and Child Care Settings" April 2025. <https://healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/held/2025-campaign-call-for-action/> and "A Collective Call for Action to Ensure Healthy Indoor Air Quality In Schools and Child Care Settings" April 2024. <https://healthyenvironmentforkids.ca/held/2024-campaign-indoor-air-quality/2024-call-for-action/>

¹⁰ HL8.3 - Public Health Impacts of Climate Change in Toronto: A Path Forward for Responding to the Climate Crisis, <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.HL8.3>

¹¹ HL26.5 - Planning for Climate Change Monitoring to Understand Health Impacts and Support Resilience in Toronto, <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.HL26.5>

humidity and CO2 levels in classrooms; the extent of mould associated with flood events.

- Identifying the infrastructure improvements needed to address the health impacts of climate change on student health at schools. These may include:
 - measures to mitigate the impacts of extreme heat on school grounds by maximizing natural and constructed seasonal shade, using natural play surfaces, and restricting the use of tarmac/pavement and other impervious surfaces.
 - measures to improve indoor air quality such as the addition of mechanical cooling and ventilation
 - measures to reduce heat impacts in classrooms such as by adding window shadings.
- Advocating to other levels of government to fund the implementation of infrastructure improvements required to protect students' health from climate impacts and ensure that school environments support the health and well-being of children and youth.
- Supporting the development of education on climate-related health harms and strategies for addressing these harms, including by:
 - partnering with academics, community researchers, City divisions and others to conduct research on health-related behavioural impacts that contribute to adaptation and resilience to climate change in the student population.
 - supporting young people in taking action together in their school community to address the causes of climate change and implement climate solutions that protect their health.
 - engaging school communities in the development of educational materials on the health impacts of extreme heat and strategies for protecting against these impacts; updating school boards' Hot Weather/Heat Response plans with input from the local communities; ensuring that these plans are communicated to students, caregivers, and staff in the languages used in the community.
 - developing educational materials on the health harms of air pollution, particularly wildfire smoke pollution, and the actions that can be taken to protect against these harms; supporting the development of action plans on days of high air pollution to protect student health.
 - supporting the development of school community emergency plans with guidance on how to conduct risk assessments, identify the actions needed to protect student health, particularly the most vulnerable such as students with disabilities, and plan for how to communicate in an emergency.

- Addressing climate anxiety in initiatives relating to student mental health, with particular attention to the health needs of Indigenous students under the guidance of Indigenous knowledge keepers.

As the climate crisis worsens, the opportunity to include plans for addressing climate-related health harms in the next Toronto Healthy Schools Strategy should not be missed. In taking this step, the Board of Health and the school boards would be able to better protect the health and well-being of the youngest and most vulnerable Toronto residents from climate harms. They would also be demonstrating the leadership that young people need to see. And in the long term, actions undertaken to address climate change in school would improve public health outcomes by ensuring that our schools are better equipped to protect students and by giving students the knowledge and skills they will need to protect their own health over the course of their lifetimes in a climate-changed world.



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