

Limiting Obesogenic Environments

The presence of fast-food restaurants within a 15-minute walk radius from a school results in an increase of 5.2% in the obesity rate at the school¹.

- In Quebec, nearly one in four children is obese or overweight².
- The presence of fast-food restaurants near schools is a common occurrence in the province:

37% of public schools in Quebec are located within a 15-minute walk of a fast-food restaurant³.

95% of children believe that fast-food restaurants are close enough to their school that they can go and eat there during the lunch hour.

- Several studies have shown that the presence of fast-food restaurants near schools significantly increases the risk of obesity among children.
- The presence of fast-food establishments jeopardizes schools efforts to implement nutritional policies limiting junk food in their cafeterias and encouraging students to adopt healthy eating habits^{4, 5, 6, 7}.

72% of children agree that the proximity of restaurants is a reason to eat out⁸.

The ASPQ's Action-Research

From 2009 to 2011, the Quebec Public Health Association (Association pour la santé publique du Québec – ASPQ), in partnership with the Quebec Healthy Cities and Towns Network (Réseau québécois de Villes et Villages en santé – RQVVS) and the Quebec Coalition on Weight-Related Problems (Coalition québécoise sur la problématique du poids – Coalition Poids), conducted an action-research set in the cities of Baie-Saint-Paul, Gatineau and Lavaltrie.

Objectives

- Understand how municipalities can intervene to improve the food environment around schools.
- Explore the possibility of using urban planning by-laws to limit the establishment of new fast-food restaurants near schools.
- Acknowledge and consider legal, urbanistic and political considerations surrounding the implementation of such measures.
- Produce a guide intended for Quebec municipalities.
 - Based on the experiences of Baie-Saint-Paul, Gatineau and Lavaltrie, the guide presents the main steps required to modify the food environment around schools, according to the context and specificities of each municipality.



Evaluation of the Action-Research

The findings from research efforts demonstrate that the objectives of the action-research have been fulfilled:

- The design and relevance of the action-research is supported by abundant literature.
- In accordance with Quebec's legislative framework, legal and urbanistic tools can be used to limit the offer of unhealthy foods around schools.
- More than 200 mentions in the media have informed the population of this action-research.
- The population expressed increased support for the action-research, at both the provincial (72%) and the municipal (84%) levels.

In 2010, 72% of Quebec's population agreed with measures to limit the establishment of fast-food restaurants near schools.

Summary of the Approach

1. Assembling a Work Team

- Consultants in municipal law and urban planning support the local task team in the development and analysis of different proposals for by-law modifications while recognizing the applicable urbanistic and legal limitations.

2. Analyzing the Local Situation

- Involving relevant decision-makers
- Defining the target territory, be it the whole or a part of the municipality
- Determining the city's orientations and existing municipal initiatives to promote healthy lifestyles
- Compiling maps of schools and their environments

3. Identifying the Stakeholders

- Elected municipal officials
- Contributors from municipal, health, and educational spheres
- Contributors from *Québec en forme*
- Parents
- Local business community

4. Evaluating the Regulatory Options

- A) Normative by-laws
 - Prohibition of certain principal uses or accessory uses
 - Relative distances
 - Fixing use quotas
- B) Discretionary by-laws
 - Conditional use by-laws

5. Identifying the Procedure for Municipal By-law Modifications

Conclusions

- The action-research demonstrated that it is possible to use zoning and other urban planning tools to limit the establishment of fast-food restaurants near schools.
- Urban planning by-laws are tools that may be used in conjunction with other interventions and campaigns promoting health and the prevention of weight problems.

To find out more

Consult the guide *The School Zone and Nutrition: Courses of Action for the Municipal Sector*

www.aspq.org

