

## 2020 Ontario Pre-Budget Submission

Prepared for the Standing Committee on Finance

January 24, 2020

### About Start2Finish

Start2Finish was born out of the vision of founder **Brian Warren**, former CFL Grey Cup Champion and inner-city schoolteacher, which is to **eradicate the effects of child poverty through education**. At S2F, we teach kids skills and character traits to help them graduate and be successful in school and in life. Start2Finish's mission is to break the cycle of child poverty by providing ongoing educational support to Canada's at-risk children throughout their school years, nurturing mind, body and social health so they are empowered to succeed and become role models for change.

Start2Finish has developed a comprehensive, measurable **"Pathway of Hope"** that features education-based programs empowering the children we serve from **elementary school all the way to post-secondary**. This pathway includes our **Backpack Program, Running & Reading Clubs, Daily 20 fitness program, Junior Coach Leadership Development Program, and Pathway of Hope Scholarship Program**.

### Executive Summary

Over the past year, the government has put forward several solutions to mental health and education reform for school aged children. We believe that the Daily Physical Activity (DPA) requirement is a tool that is underutilized in the strategy. The recommendations we outline include increasing funding for the DPA, diversifying mental health funding, and championing the physical activity/mental health connection for elementary students.

At Start2Finish, we believe that mental health, physical activity, and education are interconnected. Starting in 2004, Start2Finish began formulating a Fitness-Literacy model. Supporters including researchers, athletes, and community members were very crucial in helping put together a comprehensive 32-week program of fitness and running. The reading portion was combined with the physical activity as a critical complement to help kids address low literacy, an accurate indicator as early as grade 1 of those prone to dropout in high school. Putting these two unlikely components together, the Start2Finish "Fitness Literacy Model" was addressing what he coined as the **"\*BIG 7\*"** – seven factors that correlate with

students' success and are tied to socio-economic status. These factors are: Health, Vocabulary, Effort & Energy, Cognitive-Capacity, Mind-Set, Relationships, and Stress Level.

Our programs target elementary aged students with collaboration between Start2Finish, school boards, local and national businesses, services clubs, and a host of other funders that make up the S2F community matrix. Start2Finish has a Score Card that assesses a community's readiness for the program, which provides the standard by which all expansion is measured.

In 2019, we began formulating the Daily 20 Program (D20) to support the efforts of Ontario school board in fulfilling the Daily Physical Activity requirements. Our partners include the Thames Valley District School Board and the London District Catholic School Board. The school boards and schools participated in the development of the program through surveys, roundtables, and committee meetings soliciting their input and feedback regarding the challenges they face in meeting the DPA. The suggestions/requirements they had for a program addressed these challenges.

The D20 is an easily implementable, embeddable resource that operates directly within existing school curriculum or as a stand-alone solution. According to our partners, the interface is user friendly and accessible. The program is five days a week and each day is divided into five-minute segments. The rollout of the program to all our partners will take place over three years. We are currently in our first year.

## Recommendations

### 1. Diversify mental health funding

*"Too many students are struggling with their mental health and well-being... I am proud to be a member of this government that is applying a compassionate eye to making mental health a priority by more than doubling mental health supports for our kids."*<sup>1</sup>

- Minister Stephen Lecce

We believe that the connection between physical activity and mental health is missing in the government's mental health funding strategy. There is an explicit connection between mental health and physical activity; however, this is evident in the previous budget. Often mental health and physical education are siloed into two different categories. In reality, by treating these entities as complementary there is a greater benefit to children and cost effectiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> "Ontario More Than Doubles Mental Health Funding for Students," news.ontario.ca, n.d., <https://news.ontario.ca/edu/en/2019/10/ontario-more-than-doubles-mental-health-funding-for-students.html>.

In a 2019 study of our Running & Reading Club after-school program we found that hyperactivity problems significantly decreased, perceptions of mastery increased, self-efficacy increased, and overall confidence increased when physical activity and learning was paired.<sup>2</sup>

Frontline workers and organizations which support children are crucial; however, preventative strategies at an elementary school level is just as crucial. By supporting organizations which pair physical activity with mental health and wellness, it fulfills the role of the education to teach children how to cope in our high stress world.

## **2. Broader promotion of physical activity, mental health connection**

*Physical activity is essential for the healthy growth and development of children and youth. It can have a positive impact on their physical fitness and help lay the foundation for healthy, productive lives. Participating in physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour is known to enhance well-being, which is an important element of academic achievement and overall student success.<sup>3</sup>*

- Policy/Program Memorandum No. 138

The understanding that physical activity promotes the mental health of a child is not a new notion within policy; however, the culture of inactivity in Ontario has not shifted. We believe that a broader promotion of the connection between physical activity and mental health would aid in this shift.

Throughout our first pilot year of the D20, a major hurdle was a lack of teacher compliance. In our 2019 Running & Reading Club study we found that the connection between wellness and education amplified when there was strong teacher participation and full investment of the school principal.

By promoting this connection through campaigns, it would set a precedence that this is the direction Ontario is moving in order to promote the greater wellbeing of children. This promotion crosses sectors including education, public health, and poverty reduction. By setting precedence, it empowers teachers to participate and in turn increases the well-being of children.

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<sup>2</sup> “R&R Club Study 2019,” Start2Finish, n.d., <https://www.start2finishonline.org/running-and-reading-club-study-2019>.

<sup>3</sup> Government of Ontario, “Policy/Program Memorandum No. 138,” n.d., <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/138.html>.

### **3. Increase current Daily Physical Activity funding**

In the 2019 budget, the Daily Physical Activity requirements were not mentioned. As of 2017, each school board and provincial school receives \$135 per elementary school, and each school authority will receive \$500 to support the implementation of DPA. The funding is intended to ensure elementary students participate in a minimum of 20 minutes of physical activity per day.<sup>4</sup> The DPA is an underutilized, existing tool which make tangible change in the education system.

By investing more into this program, current education and mental health initiatives will be supported in a greater way. By giving schools greater incentive to actively participate, more students will be helped.

### **Conclusion and next Steps**

The government has committed itself to increasing the overall welfare of children through education. We believe by uniting two siloed arenas of physical activity and mental health there will be a greater impact of Canadian children. With the groundwork of the DPA already laid, this transition would be easy implementable. By diversifying mental health funding, a greater amount of youth will be served. A broader promotion and investment of the physical activity/mental health connection will create a greater culture of wellness among school aged children which will shift the Canadian fabric in years to come.

### **For more information, please contact:**

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<sup>4</sup> "Support for Physical Activity: Daily Physical Activity Funding for Elementary Schools and Physical Activity Grants for Secondary Schools," n.d., 3.