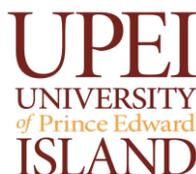


# Engaging Parent Voices in School Health Knowledge Translation and Dissemination Parent Workshop

D. Murnaghan, PhD, RN; B. Bell, PhD; C. Laurence, MA; M. Munro-Bernard, MA

September 28, 2011  
Charlottetown, PE

Comprehensive School Health Research (CSHR) Group  
University of Prince Edward Island  
550 University Ave.  
Charlottetown, PE  
C1A 4P3  
Tel: (902) 894-2820  
Fax: (902) 566-6486  
Email: [csqrt@upei.ca](mailto:csqrt@upei.ca)  
Web: <http://www.upei.ca/cshr>



*The facilitation of the workshop and production of the associated report was made possible due to financial support provided by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The views expressed within this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the project funder.*

# Engaging Parent Voices in School Health Knowledge Translation and Dissemination

## September 28, 2011

### Background

The Comprehensive School Health Research Group (CSHR), at the University of Prince Edward Island, received a “Meeting, Planning, and Dissemination” grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to host a parent workshop to share and discuss with parents information regarding school health. Twelve parents representing students from grades K-12 participated in the evening workshop held on September 28, 2011. The parent participants represented eleven schools from the three school boards.

### Purpose and Objectives

The overall goal of the parent workshop was to engage parents in dialogue about youth health priorities and to identify knowledge exchange approaches that work best with parents. The workshop had several purposes, which included: to share school health information; to learn parents’ youth health priorities; and to hear how parents want to learn about school health information. Three specific objectives of the workshop included:

- To engage parents in thinking about student health priorities and the influences that create a healthy school environment.
- To identify ways to disseminate school health information to parents to encourage knowledge use and inform parental actions within a school.
- To raise awareness and share information regarding SHAPES/YSS-PEI and the School Health Grant.

The parents participated in several small and large group discussions throughout the evening. Results from the 2008-09 SHAPES/YSS-PEI survey were presented to the parents, as well as information regarding the School Health Grant. This report details the information that resulted from the small and large group activities.

*\*\* Please note that a general overview of the workshop can be found on the Comprehensive School Health Research Group’s website: [www.upei.ca/cshr/2011](http://www.upei.ca/cshr/2011)*

### Welcome

Dr. Donna Murnaghan, Comprehensive School Health Research Group – UPEI, welcomed the parents and introduced the research team. She then provided a brief overview of the agenda and the purpose of the workshop. After participant introductions, the question “What is knowledge exchange?” was asked. Participants described knowledge exchange as sharing information across schools, having resources and making sure that information is clearly communicated and accurately received.

### School Health Priorities and Influences

For the first activity the parents were divided into four small groups with each group designating a note taker who remained at the table throughout the activity. This discussion format is known as the World Cafe method and has been found to be a better method to engage and increase

participant understanding in large group contexts.<sup>1</sup> The parents discussed one question in their small group and then moved to another group until all three questions were answered. This allowed participants to meet and interact with more people. Responses for each question were then shared with the large group.

**Question 1 – What are the overall health and well-being priorities for your child?**

- Mental Health
  - Bullying (inadequate outdoor supervision); stress; belonging; self-esteem; need for de-stressor time in schools (often not there); quiet reflection time.
  - Good social interactions; friendships; happiness.
  - Mental health counsellors in smaller schools are only there once every few weeks/days and aren't often there when they are needed – need increased visits.
  - Continuous learning, gaining knowledge and absorbing it; students should be challenged to the best of their ability.
  - Increased opportunities for creative outlets and extracurricular activities (sports, arts, music, etc.) both inside and outside the school.
- Healthy Eating
  - Homemade lunches. Discussion surrounding school lunches brought up questions such as: What are students bringing for lunch? Should certain foods be banned? If so, where to draw the line?
  - Explain to youth why it's important to eat healthy – makes it easier to encourage engagement in these behaviours if they understand the importance.
  - Increased availability of healthy, quick snacks for youth who are busy and on the go with various activities.
  - Opportunities to try different healthy foods, especially for younger students – more willing to try new things if behaviours are initiated at an earlier age.
- Students should be educated about the acceptance of differences (e.g., ethnicity, physical or intellectual disabilities, allergies, celiac disease, Epi-pens, etc.). Students may ask their parents questions, but parents don't always know what to say or how to explain these issues.
- Drug and Alcohol Prevention
- Dental Health

*Summary:* The parents identified priorities that were specific to the four primary health behaviours from the SHAPES/YSS-PEI survey, with a particular focus on mental fitness and healthy eating. However, when identifying priorities and possible solutions, the parents didn't consider the particular behaviour to be independent of other behaviours. The parents spoke of wanting younger students to be introduced to new and different types of physical activities, extracurricular options, healthy foods, friends, experiences, etc. so that they would be more likely and open to trying new things as they get older. The parents also felt that it was important that students be kept informed about the importance of engaging in healthy behaviours. In addition, the parents felt that students should be educated about other students' unique health needs (e.g., disabilities or food allergies), to help them better understand why some students may not be allowed to bring in certain types of foods to school or participate in particular activities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fullarton, C. and Palermo, J. (2008). Evaluation of a large group method in an education institution: The World Cafe versus large group facilitation. *Journal of Institutional Research*, 14(1), 1-18.

**Question 2** - *What do you think the role of the school is in the health of students and what do you think the role of the parent is in the health of students?*

- Role of Schools
  - To support and educate students; learning should be a priority for schools and this includes health education as well. More education helps students to make better choices.
  - To get information out to parents on topics related to health, including research information such as SHAPES/YSS-PEI. If schools provide parents with literature, parents can reinforce the information being shared at school.
  - To provide opportunities for children to engage in healthy behaviours, which can include increased time to be physically active, healthier food options in the cafeteria, etc. If students are leaving school to buy lunch due to unappealing options available in the cafeteria, then they are also missing out on opportunities to participate in lunchtime extracurricular activities – need to find a balance that will encourage students to remain at school for lunch.
  - To allow parents to be more involved and be open to parents' wishes. Rather than only viewing parents as volunteers who are there to run a particular activity, parents should be involved in decisions and the policy making process.
  
- Role of Parents
  - To support the school and reinforce messages learned at school.
  - To lead and teach by example. Parents have to provide opportunities for children to be physically active and to eat healthy food.
  - To be open to input and suggestions from their child about what to pack in lunches and for healthy snacks.
  - To seek out funding from a variety of sources if they are unable to financially afford sports programs for their children.
  - To be willing to step up and take an active role by volunteering at the school, making their ideas and wishes known to the school, and making known that they want to be included in decision-making processes.

*Summary:* Schools and parents need to be 'on the same page' so they are both reinforcing the same behaviours and sharing consistent messages with the students between school and home environments. Information sharing is especially important because if parents aren't aware of what is going on at school, or what the school's particular priorities and goals are, parents aren't able to get involved. The parents would like schools to involve them more in decisions rather than only viewing them as a volunteer for particular activities. For example, parents may volunteer to help with the breakfast program by serving the students, but they would also like to be involved in the decisions about what foods to serve students. Parents want schools to be more open to their involvement, but they also recognize that parents have to be willing to step up, get involved, and make sure their ideas are heard.

**Question 3** - *How can schools and parents work together in creating a healthy environment for students?*

- It cannot be overstated how important it is for schools and parents to actually work together, in groups such as parent councils and teacher committees, and related activities.
- Schools and parents need to communicate more with each other – schools can keep parents informed through email, literature/pamphlets about current issues at the school (e.g., pink eye or lice issues), while parents can keep schools aware of problems at home (e.g., if the child is having a bad day before they even arrive at school).

- The beginning of the school year is a great opportunity to share information with parents as that is when parents are looking for information.
- Parents need to be more vocal and involved.
- Parents and teachers/administrators need to lead by example and model good behaviour, as well as reinforce healthy behaviours.
- Parents and schools should work with public health and other relevant organizations in their region.
- Have open dialogue between school and home regarding alcohol and drug use at school.
- Specific activities to create a healthy environment could include: free exercise groups after school run by teacher or parent volunteers; parent/grandparent-run breakfast programs (especially during exam periods); healthy lunch options; opportunities for exercise, such as intramurals, biking, walking, snowshoeing clubs, etc.; providing an opportunity for younger students to be physically active before classes in the morning and before eating lunch.
- During the discussion, the parents did acknowledge the costs and resources that would be needed to make some of the suggested changes, and recognized the need to be aware of the possible impacts or challenges those changes may have.
- Schools and parents must step back and recognize the developmental level of the particular age group with which they are working, and use individual approaches based on evidence (e.g., elementary vs. high school).
- Everyone could work together more successfully if the students were listened to and their opinions were taken into consideration.

*Summary:* Parents felt that in order for schools and parents to work together to create a healthy environment for students, they needed to actually work together, not just say they will. They also need to increase the two-way communication between schools and parents. If parents and school staff could teach and lead by example and support and reinforce similar messages, students may be less confused by conflicting messages. For some issues, parents and schools may not have the knowledge to find solutions so they should partner with related community and government organizations for support. Schools and parents can work better together if they acknowledge student opinions and engage students in discussions about ideas they may have regarding healthy behaviours.

## **SHAPES/YSS-PEI 2008-09 Results Presentation**

A general overview of provincial results from the 2008-09 SHAPES/YSS-PEI survey and information regarding the School Health Grant program were shared with the participants. The parents thought that the information was interesting and asked questions related specifically to the School Health Grant program and application details. The participants were interested to know how they, as parents, could help the school put together an application for the current year. Many parents were previously unaware of the Grant program, and therefore were quite surprised to find out that their school had applied for, and received, funding from the Grant program in previous years. It was also thought that presentations regarding their school's specific results would be beneficial for parents, and would help them to take action on the evidence. The idea of parent presentations fits well into the research team's goals for the current knowledge exchange year, which includes plans to continue building relationships with schools and communities through meetings and presentations with principals, students, parents, etc.

## Discussion of Knowledge Dissemination

Parents participated in small group discussions to answer three questions related to knowledge dissemination.

### **Question 1** - *What information about student or school health do you want or need?*

- Information from Public Health, such as fact sheets, for different health issues present in the school or child's class (e.g., lice, chicken pox, contagious diseases, etc.).
  - Allergies in the school (necessary to be able to pack appropriate lunches and snacks).
  - Drug information sessions for both students and parents with physicians, recovering drug addicts, families of drug addicts, RCMP etc., speaking to their personal experiences.
- Information related to issues as they arise, such as developmental milestones or activity levels.
- What the focus areas at school are to know where to direct education at home.
- List of interventions that were, or could be, funded through the School Health Grant program.
- School-based data, as well as board and provincial level information.

### **Question 2** – *How can we get you the information you need (format, means of communication, etc)?*

- School newsletter every two weeks – can include information on nutrition, exercises, etc.
- Electronically through email, websites, blogs, etc.
- Use government and school websites to post information directly (e.g., a school's SHAPES/YSS-PEI School Health Profile), or post links for other websites to access research, survey information, school health resources, etc.
- Facebook pages, for both parents and students, that are continuously updated and moderated.
  - Inform parents initially through email about page.
  - Student page can be utilized to generate appropriate conversations.
- Telephone messaging system.
- Inserts with information in local newspapers.

### **Question 3** - *How can we increase the awareness of the different types of health information that is available?*

- Increase accessibility of information by posting it in areas where parents normally frequent, such as doctors' and dentists' offices, public health, libraries, grocery stores etc.
- Increase the amount and frequency of media coverage (radio, television, newspapers).
- The beginning of the school year, when families are transitioning back to school, provides a great opportunity as parents are a captive audience and looking for information.
- Make use of local magazines specific to families and parents to share information (e.g., Island Family, and Parenting magazines, etc.).
- Host information sessions.

## Closing

Following completion of the final large group discussion the parents were thanked for their attendance and participation in the workshop. The parents were also invited to take part in the

full day Provincial Youth Health Forum held on October 12<sup>2</sup>. As part of the closing, the parents were asked to reflect on what they could do with the information on school/youth health to make a difference at their child's school and what they would need to be able to take action.

## **Feedback**

Prior to the workshop, the parent participants were only somewhat aware of health initiatives in their child's school. This was evident when information about SHAPES/YSS-PEI and the School Health Grant program were shared with the parents. Many of them were unaware of either, even though a majority of the schools the parents were representing had participated in the previous year. Based on their workshop evaluation responses, all of the parents felt that all three workshop objectives were achieved. The participants also agreed or strongly agreed that they plan to discuss the workshop and outcomes of the workshop with others. One of the common priorities that parents expressed as necessary for moving forward to support youth health in school settings is that all relevant parties need to work together. This includes not only increased communication and cooperation between schools and parents, but students especially need to be engaged as they are usually left out of the decision-making process.

## **Recommendations**

The information obtained during the parent workshop, as well as during the planning and coordination process, enabled several recommendations to be determined.

- In order to recruit a wide variety of participants, multiple avenues to reach parents should be pursued, which could include the use of advertisements in local newspapers.
- Schools should allow interested parents to be actively involved and engaged in planning and organizing activities.
- Multiple formats of communication that are easily accessible should be used when sharing information with parents, such as emails, newsletters, brochures, school webpage, etc.
- Parents would like to be kept informed of issues as they arise in school or in class. If the school doesn't have the knowledge to provide relevant information to parents they should look to other organizations for support, such as Public Health.

Overall, the parent participants want better communication between schools and parents, and they would like schools to be more open to meaningful parental involvement. However, the parents did not place the burden on the schools alone to do more. Instead, they recognize that parents must play an active role and must be willing to step up. In order to move forward, it is especially important that parents and schools collaborate and work together to create a healthy environment for students.

## **Next Steps**

Data collection for SHAPES-PEI occurs biennially with the CSHR group engaging in knowledge exchange during the interim year. As part of the knowledge exchange year of 2011-2012, the CSHR group has been and will continue to meet with various stakeholders to share and discuss

---

<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the second Youth Excel Provincial Forum was to focus on the progress that had occurred since the initial Provincial Forum held in November 2010, and to discuss next steps for continuing to collaborate on and sustain youth health activities in PEI school communities.

SHAPES-PEI results from the previous data collection years. These groups include, but are not limited to: government departments, NGO's, school boards, and administrators, teachers, students and parents of individual schools. Knowledge gained from the workshops will be incorporated into the various knowledge exchange activities.

Also, information/fact sheets for both parents and students will be developed based on feedback gained from the student and parent workshops, as well as lessons learned from implementing SHAPES-PEI and the School Health Grant.

## Appendix

### Lessons Learned

There were difficulties in attaining the targeted sample size for the workshop and throughout the whole recruitment process several lessons became apparent. Previous research conducted by the CSHR team has focused on youth participants, in which schools were targeted to recruit students. As this workshop was focused on parent participants, a different recruitment strategy had to be employed. Instead of placing an additional burden on school administrators by asking them to nominate parents who are active in their school community, the research team partnered with the provincial Home and School Federation to reach parents through their network of contacts.

Initially, the presidents of all grade 7-12 Home and School Associations were contacted and were asked to nominate two parents to participate in the workshop. However, there was slow response from these presidents due to a variety of factors. Firstly, because the recruitment for the parent workshop occurred in early September, several Home and Schools had not yet had their first meeting of the year and, thus, they were unable to share the workshop details with other members. Some presidents contacted other parents who they personally knew and thought may be interested. However, this placed the onus on the Home and School presidents to find a parent representative, rather than being able to share the information with the whole committee and have an interested parent volunteer to participate. Also, some of the contact information for the presidents was out of date due to parents changing positions, which led to difficulties in contacting some Home and School Associations.

We observed that as students move from elementary to junior high and high school, Home and School Associations tend to become less active. This is likely due, in part, to the increased independence of older students, which leads parents to become naturally less engaged in their child's school. Leading up to the workshop, the participation numbers were lower than expected so it was decided to contact presidents of elementary Home and School Associations who had been previously excluded from the recruitment strategy. The expanded target sample increased recruitment numbers to a total of 18 parents, with 12 of those recruited attending the workshop.

By recruiting parents who are members of their child's Home and School, parents who are already actively engaged in the school are targeted. Unfortunately, this results in little representation of those parents who aren't already involved in the school. Although several of the participants at the workshop were somewhat aware of current initiatives at their school, it is likely that of any parents, they would be the most likely to know what information is available and how to access it. By not being able to recruit parents outside of Home and School Associations, it is likely that some key perspectives about increasing awareness and engaging parents might have been missed. In order to reach a wider variety of parents, other avenues of recruitment could be utilized, such as placing advertisements in local newspapers so that current engagement wouldn't be a barrier to learning about school health information. However, the parents who attended the workshop are very active in their local Home and Schools, making it easier for them to plan next steps or act on the information that they learned during the workshop.