

BUILDING HEALTHY SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

A GUIDE FOR MOVING KNOWLEDGE
TO ACTION IN SCHOOLS

A report by the Comprehensive School Health Research Group
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The Comprehensive School Health Research (CSHR) Group is a multidisciplinary research team located at the University of Prince Edward Island. Our research focus is youth health with schools as a setting. Through local, provincial and national collaboration, the CSHR Group also currently oversees the following projects:

- **School Health Action Planning and Evaluation System – Prince Edward Island (SHAPES-PEI)**
- **Canadian Student Tobacco Alcohol and Drugs Survey (CSTADS)**
- **(S)chools (A)gainst (C)ancer: Using a (K)nowledge to Action Process (SACK)**

SHAPES-PEI is a youth health monitoring and surveillance system that collects health behaviour data from PEI youth (grades 5-12). SHAPES-PEI/CSTADS is implemented in a two-phase cycle that includes 1) data collection and 2) knowledge exchange (KE) activities. SACK was developed as an extension of SHAPES-PEI's KE efforts, using school-level data to create evidence-based health projects and activities.

This **Knowledge to Action School Health** fact sheet presents key findings from the study, (S)chools (A)gainst (C)ancer: Using a (K)nowledge to Action Process (SACK). The information presented is a guide for moving knowledge to action (KTA) within a school setting; its development was informed through collaboration with parents, administration, staff, students and others from school communities across Prince Edward Island.

Healthy school communities are school environments that “acknowledge the joint responsibility on the school and broader community for the health of students, staff and families who are part of a school” [1]. Schools benefit from using a socio-ecological model (using intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community and policy levels) to understand the connections between personal and environmental factors within a school setting. Considering the interplay between these levels can help achieve positive, sustainable health outcomes for youth [2].

Key Facts Include:

- The importance of using a comprehensive approach to school health
- Why moving knowledge to action in schools can be difficult
- What school teams found useful in moving KTA
- The importance of building networks of support

Background

(S)chools (A)gainst (C)ancer: Using a (K)nowledge to Action Process (SACK) was a two year school-based study conducted by a team of researchers and community partners from Prince Edward Island, Ontario and Manitoba. The purpose of this study was to: 1) to increase knowledge exchange processes and uptake of available evidence; and 2) to work collaboratively with school communities to develop sustainable action plans based on available evidence that follows a comprehensive school health framework.

SACK monitored the impacts of an enhanced knowledge to action (KTA) process on school health policy and programming in PEI, with control schools in Manitoba. This research provided resources for PEI schools to plan school health action based on SHAPES-PEI data. Human resources were provided by the CSHR group and other community members to support this process, as research suggests that building trusting relationships is an essential step in the creation of successful knowledge exchange efforts [3].

PEI schools were given an open invitation to participate in SACK, and participating schools (n=10) represented an assortment of elementary, junior high, senior high and consolidated schools. Schools were asked to assemble school action teams, ideally composed of administration, staff, students, parents and community members. The CSHR group worked with school teams to identify priority areas based on SHAPES-PEI school



data, tailor interventions to suit school needs, and implement sustainable school health activities to address modifiable risk behaviours to reduce cancer burden.

Three key modifiable risk factors (physical inactivity [4], obesity [5], and tobacco use [6]) add critically to Canada’s cancer burden. Working toward cancer prevention through addressing risk behaviours in children and youth requires population level approaches that enable positive behaviour change and address influences outside individual and school levels. Given that most youth spend the majority of their week in a school setting, schools become an important place for the delivery of population level interventions to promote healthy behaviours for chronic disease prevention.

What Does A Comprehensive Approach Involve?

Using a comprehensive approach to understanding school health requires us to re-imagine the scope of factors impacting health within a school setting; the focus needs to extend beyond children and youth, to include the school environment and the relationships among schools, families, and communities. Comprehensive approaches use well orchestrated, complementary strategies to target school health from a variety of angles in order to amplify overall positive outcomes [7].

Why Is It Important To Use Comprehensive Plans For Unique School Environments?

School environments differ in many ways, including their priorities, leadership, curricular demands, socio-economic factors, physical environments and levels of community support [8]. Identifying what may be possible within a school requires an understanding of that school’s unique composition, including its strengths and challenges. Taking inventory of health-based activities, policies, teaching, partnerships and evidence use [1] is an important first step in determining the best direction for health initiatives.

SACK schools created action plans using the Healthy School Communities Framework [Figure 1]. This framework provided a basis for school health interventions by outlining “what to do” to create a healthy school community. The inner circle - Healthy School Policy, Teaching & Learning, Physical & Social Environment, Community Partnerships & Services and Use of Evidence – highlights areas to address when creating school health projects and activities. Schools are complex environments with many interconnected variables; each of these variables has an impact on school health. SACK school teams worked collaboratively on action plans to: review health-based programming and activities currently offered at the school; identify areas in need of improvement; and specify roles, responsibilities and timelines that would allow the team to achieve their school health goals. Equipped with local school health evidence (including SHAPES-PEI school data), and with a clear vision of “what to do” for effective school health action, school teams were better able to envision the process of moving knowledge to action within their own school environments.

Figure 1. Healthy School Communities Framework (Bassett-Gunter et al., 2012)



How Can Schools Move Knowledge To Action?

SACK teams were presented with SHAPES-PEI school-level data to help identify health priorities within their school communities. This data, supplemented by team knowledge of school health needs, provided a foundation for evidence-based action. School teams were then guided through a KTA process, based on Graham et al.'s (2006) Knowledge to Action Process Framework. This framework uses a cyclical approach to KTA: knowledge informs action; action is evaluated for outcomes/success; and lessons learned inform new knowledge that can create more accurate and effective interventions in the future [9]. School teams used this guiding framework to:

- Identify, review and select knowledge
- Identify the problem
- Adapt knowledge to the local context
- Assess barriers to knowledge use
- Select, tailor and implement interventions

Schools used the Knowledge to Action Process framework [9] to put into action the Healthy School Communities framework [1]; this supported the movement of KTA using a comprehensive approach, so that 'action' could be meaningfully embedded within the school community as one piece of a longer term goal.

What Makes Moving Knowledge To Action So Difficult?

School teams were asked to identify the barriers they encounter when attempting to move knowledge to action. Some of the barriers that can pose serious challenges for school teams include:

- Time: Activity planning/organizational time for school staff; school day schedule (lack of curriculum flexibility, limited 'time off task'); limited time for extras before, during, or after school
- Human Resources: Lack of parent/community volunteers; school staff overburdened/cannot run programs; over-representation of certain voices in priority setting, decision-making and planning
- School Infrastructure: Lack of outdoor equipment and facilities; physical space within a school; student transportation issues
- Financial Resource Challenges: Short term funding often does not create long term impact
- Finding/Accessing/Applying Research Evidence: Research tools are not user-friendly; distrust/de-valuing of student-derived evidence; competing priorities (depending on individuals at the table, funding available, competing evidence, etc.)

What Have We Learned From SACK Schools?

SACK school teams used a variety of strategies to overcome the barriers of moving KTA within their own school communities. Focus group discussions aimed at identifying these strategies allowed us to interpret how schools have applied the outer circle of the Healthy School Communities framework [1] to their project planning and implementation. These areas include: Whole School Approach; Champion & Team; Assess, Plan, Learn; Health & Education Synergy and Sustainability. These components of a Healthy School Community show schools "how to do it" when applying a comprehensive approach to health promotion activities. SACK schools identified guiding themes within each area to make health planning easier to implement and more effective in its delivery. (continued on next page)



1. Make 'Health' a Part of your School Culture: Whole School Approach

The whole school approach depends upon students, staff, parents and community members working together towards a shared vision of community health. Research shows that buy-in from administration, staff, students and parents – supported by community resources – is essential for positive school health outcomes [10]. SACK schools teams identified the need to:

- Create strategic, lasting community partnerships with key people/organizations
- Offer meaningful, inclusive activities that support a school-wide comprehensive approach
- Focus on building connectedness among students, staff, and parents
- Do an inventory of staff knowledge/skills to assess and build school health capacity
- Highlight connections between school health initiatives and personal health habits
- Bring parents into the school environment

2. Create an Effective Team: Champion & Team

Finding the right people to be on your team is a very important step in the KTA process. The International Union for Health Promotion and Education determined that a supportive administration, accompanied by a small and diverse group of people to lead and coordinate activities, may be most effective in health promotion efforts [11]. SACK schools considered the composition of their teams, and determined that school teams are most effective when they:

- Have an identified leader/champion who is: receptive to input, passionate about health, knowledgeable about resources, comfortable liaising with partners
- Value student voices and ideas
- Meet regularly, represent different interests, and are cohesive in their school health vision
- Foster an effective team environment by building shared enthusiasm for project goals

3. Understand Your School Environment: Assess, Plan, Learn

SACK schools followed a guided process to assess their current school health environment, plan and implement their tailored school activities, and evaluate their outcomes. Research shows that beginning with a common, clearly defined health focus (e.g., tobacco use) can help schools concentrate efforts for greater overall impact [12]. SACK schools suggested that teams should:

- Base project planning on available knowledge, including data and school-based knowledge
- Create short and long-term plans with specific timelines for each
- Use community supports from the beginning - to share ideas, provide resources, etc.
- Engage the school community in the planning/implementation/evaluation process
- Share outcomes of school health initiatives

4. Find Opportunities to Overlap: Health & Education Synergy

School health projects and activities maximize positive outcomes by seeking out areas of convergence between Health and Education sectors. Meaningfully incorporating health into the school environment requires using creative approaches that articulate the connection between health and academic achievement [13]. SACK school teams spoke about using synergy to:

- Address behavioural/emotional issues using school health projects i.e. active learning, targeted groups, etc.
- Offer school programs, courses and events that relate to health and wellbeing, such as culinary and/or leadership classes
- Improve health outcomes in a school environment by teaching skills and/or new knowledge for better health



5. Building – And Maintaining – Momentum: Sustainability

Given that SACK was a time-limited intervention, we encouraged school teams to create thoughtful plans for project continuation beyond the scope of our involvement. Schools planned for sustainability in a number of ways, for example, by prioritizing staff and student buy-in from the beginning [10]. School teams also considered it necessary to:

- Create a meaningful, long term vision for comprehensive school health
- Facilitate student engagement at all grade levels for continuity of student leadership
- Ensure school health strategies are relevant - and continue to be responsive - to school needs
- Adopt health initiatives into school culture, i.e. introduced at orientation, yearly events, etc.
- Embed a comprehensive school health team

Building Networks Of Support

Healthy school communities depend upon input and involvement from students, staff and administration, family and community members [1]. This network of support can mitigate many of the barriers that schools experience when moving knowledge to action. Importantly, when school teams are able to expand their network, they are able to:

- Develop a more inclusive understanding of what a ‘school community’ can look like (in order to reduce staff burden and diversify voices in health planning/decision-making);
- Enhance communication with others schools about health activities and projects (for project planning and contact information);
- Make community and government connections/partnerships (to provide financial and human resources to support school staff).

As your school undertakes new health activities and programs, consider the role of community partnerships in supporting these endeavours. If your school requires further support in finding partnership opportunities, please contact the provincial School Health Specialist, Sterling Carruthers (sdcaruthers@edu.pe.ca) or the CSHR group (shapespei@upe.ca) – we are always happy to assist schools in making these connections!

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