

DEVELOPING SCHOOL - COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

LESSONS LEARNED FROM
PEI 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 research in action summary presents key findings from the study, (S)chools (A)gainst (C)ancer: Using a (K)nowledge to Action Process (SACK), and was developed through collaboration with parents, administration, staff, students and others from school communities across Prince Edward Island. This information can be used to enhance current and future school-community partnerships by providing guidance for community partners to support the development and sustainability of healthy school communities.

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
- Fostering strategic partnerships with schools
- Promising practices: Aligning school-community priorities

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 action planning and programming in PEI, with control schools in Manitoba. This research provided resources for PEI schools to address school health priorities 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 complementary strategies to target school health from a variety of angles in order to increase overall positive outcomes [7]. For example, if students report that they are not feeling connected to students and/or teachers at their school, a comprehensive approach might include a combination of strategies such as: reviewing school discipline policies; increasing opportunities for meaningful student participation; assessing teacher classroom management practices; providing opportunities for teacher and staff professional development; and inviting community health partners into the school environment [8].

What Makes Moving Knowledge So Difficult?

Moving knowledge to action is not easy; schools experience many types of barriers, from individual barriers such as attitudes and knowledge, to systemic barriers like organization and service delivery [9]. Identifying the type of barriers that exist within school communities can guide interventions, by highlighting steps within the KTA process that require additional support. As part of the SACK process, school teams were asked to identify the barriers they encounter when attempting to move knowledge to action, so as to plan school health interventions that intentionally address, and overcome, these barriers.

Some of the barriers identified included:

- **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/devaluing of student-derived evidence; competing priorities (depending on individuals at the table, funding opportunities, competing evidence, etc.)



Fostering Strategic Partnerships.

Student diversity, workplace demands, and changing family demographics are only a few factors creating an increased need for supportive environments for youth that rely on individuals outside of the school or family [10]. Support provided through school-family-community partnerships can encourage positive student health outcomes in the school setting, as well as at home; as the Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health explains, “effective school-family-community partnerships weave together a critical mass of resources and strategies to enhance caring communities in order to support all youth and their families and enable success at school and beyond” [11]. SACK schools accessed support from individuals and groups - from both inside and outside of the school walls - by asking school community members to assist in the following ways:

- Local health and recreation organizations coordinated events and hosted activities for schools, taking the burden off school staff.
 - Go!PEI, a community-based healthy living program, organized and led a school-wide scavenger hunt, knowing that a particular school required additional human resources to run activities.
- Local health and recreation leaders drew on their personal knowledge/expertise to provide leadership for a variety of activities in their school communities.
 - Local arm wrestling and geo-caching enthusiasts presented to classrooms, helped to lead activities, and were involved in the planning of school-wide activities.
- School staff and parents volunteered their time to support, plan, lead, supervise, and participate in school activities with students.
 - Teachers learned relaxation techniques from a local yoga instructor, to practice with students in their classrooms during times of stress/anxiety.

Individuals and organizations within the community can be proactive in fostering school-community partnerships by doing an inventory of the skills, attributes and resources they have that could contribute to a healthy school community. Community partners can impact school and student health by:

<p>Initiating and fostering relationships with school admin/staff <i>(e.g., offer to support school activities, maintain regular contact, be present in the school).</i></p>	<p>Offering new perspectives in school health planning and decision-making <i>(e.g., introduce a new health priority into the school environment).</i></p>	<p>Enhancing knowledge base; providing new expertise <i>(e.g., support evidence-based interventions, offer advice/information as requested).</i></p>
<p>Connecting schools to community resources <i>(e.g., use established community-based connections to support schools, share contact information).</i></p>	<p>Offering easy to implement activity plans to schools <i>(e.g., develop interventions that require minimal time investments, and existing knowledge, of school staff).</i></p>	<p>Being flexible to accommodate school time constraints <i>(e.g., create programming that is mindful and respectful of the school day schedule).</i></p>
<p>Supporting schools through donation of time, resources, and services <i>(e.g., help schools plan, run or fund programming, depending on their needs).</i></p>	<p>Sharing facilities and/or equipment <i>(e.g., develop systems to support the common use of community resources).</i></p>	<p>Targeting programming to address particular school needs <i>(e.g. create programming that is easily adaptable to grade level for a k-12 school).</i></p>



Promising Practices For Collaboration

Partnerships work most effectively when all parties progress toward a common objective. For school-community partnerships, this translates into a need for thoughtful coordination of school-based and organizational priorities. While it can be incredibly difficult to coordinate diverse agendas in the short term, the long term alignment of school-community objectives maximizes partnership potential by supporting resource-conscious, well-planned interventions [12]. Our findings related to the development of effective partnerships are consistent with best practice literature, and highlight the importance of:

- Shared decision-making
- Collaborative identification of best practice guidelines/resources
- Defined roles and responsibilities for individuals/organizations
- Adequate funding and capacity to support joint initiatives
- Formal evaluation of short term and long term achievements

Our findings support the use of meaningful planning processes in the development of school-community partnerships. Using a collaborative planning process can strengthen the foundation of a partnership, so that pertinent questions related to program/activity design and execution are answered before initiatives are underway [13]. Although planning demands a substantial investment of time and resources, it can also positively impact school health outcomes by preparing collaborators for any obstacles that may arise.

Please consider how you and/or your organization can contribute to the healthy school community agenda in PEI. Contact the provincial School Health Specialist, Sterling Carruthers (sdcaruthers@edu.pe.ca) or the CSHR group (shapespei@upei.ca) with ideas, questions, or offers of support – we are always happy to assist in making these connections.

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