

# Healthy School-Community Partnerships

## Report Summary

### Background Information

Comprehensive School Health (CSH) is an internationally-recognized and effective approach for building healthy school communities through health and education (Joint Consortium for School Health, 2015). Partnerships and Services is one of the four main pillars that define CSH. They serve as an essential link for student achievement and the health of everyone in the school and surrounding community.

More specifically, school-community partnerships are an excellent way to build connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, or businesses to directly or indirectly promote students' social, emotional, physical, or intellectual development (Epstein et al. 2002).

### Objectives

The overarching goal of the evaluation is to assess and document the lived experiences of collaborative school-community partnerships within Alberta.

The objectives of this report are to:

- 1) Classify the common types of school-community partnerships and the various roles individuals play.
- 2) Identify the benefits and challenges associated with school-community partnerships.
- 3) Outline the implications and importance of school-community partnerships.
- 4) Provide recommendations on how to foster successful future school-community partnerships.

### What We Did

- The Alberta Centre for Active Living was contracted by Ever Active Schools to assess current school-community partnerships established within Alberta.
- Five community representatives and three school representatives agreed to share their experiences.
- Participant job titles ranged from Wellness Coordinator, Health Promotion Coordinator, School Vice Principal, Healthy Schools Program Coordinator, Wellness Recreation Director, and School Principal.
- Individual one-hour conference telephone interview were conducted with each participant.

## Report Findings

### ***Objective 1) Classify the common types of school-community partnerships and the various roles individuals play.***

#### Types of School-Community Partnerships

The most common types of school-community partnerships that participants were involved in include:

##### 1) Facility Use Agreements

- *“We have community use agreements where the community groups get to use the school free of charge. And then our classes use the facilities of the outdoor village [arena and curling rink] for free as well.”* (Participant quote)

##### 2) Information Dissemination and Knowledge Translation

- *“We distribute all health related stuff. So it can be information from Alberta Health Services, U Walk, Be Fit For Life, Ever Active Schools, or the Wellness Fund. So anything that would impact the world of school, staff, or student health.”* (Participant quote)

##### 3) Engaging Students Through Global Issues

- Local organizations contact local schools and propose partnering to aid in raising money or awareness towards a national or international campaign.

#### Roles and Responsibilities of Individuals in the Partnership

Responsibility for healthy individuals involves diverse roles among multiple environments. Within the school and community sectors of the partnership, there are numerous roles that all serve an important function. Some of the roles and responsibilities participants noted are:

##### 1) Roles of the Individual from the School

- *Liaison* – Act as the connection between the school and community environments. Establish new partnerships/opportunities and maintain existing ones.
- *Healthy Role Model* – Model healthy lifestyle choices within the schools to inspire students to buy-into health initiatives and behaviours.
- *Reinforcer* – Identify issues or problems that arise, reinforce school policy, and act as a mediator between the school and community partner.

##### 2) Roles of the Community Member

- *Researcher and Innovator* – Find new and different ways to introduce Healthy Active Living at home, at school, at work, and at play.
- *Educator* – Host workshop sessions with teachers to broaden their understanding around physical literacy and physical education concepts, and share ideas on how to incorporate these concepts into the curriculum.

- *Communicator* – create channels of communication through resource dissemination and information sharing.
- *Supporter* – Recognize that teachers and school staff have priorities in many areas. Try to support the school staff to make the activities and initiatives manageable.

## **Objective 2) Identify the benefits and challenges associated with partnerships.**

### **Benefits from Collaborating in a School-Community Partnership**

Participants from both sides of the school-community partnership identified numerous benefits from their collaboration experiences. The most commonly stated benefits are:

#### **1) The Development of Student Character Through Hands-on Experiences**

- Students develop leadership skills by having opportunities to lead.
- Students gain awareness around diverse global perspectives and have a better understanding of international struggles.

#### **2) The Exchange of Facility Use and Resource Acquisition**

- The school gains access to community recreation facilities for fun, integrated learning and unique physical education experiences. Similarly, the community gains access to the school's facility to host various local programs or events.
- Community and provincial active living partners provide the schools with easy-to-use informational resources and in return they gain direct access to their target audience to disseminate healthy information.

#### **3) The Opportunities to Grow and Collaborate**

- The schools and community can collaborate on projects with matching mandates to increase health initiatives within the schools.
- The schools and community can strategically work on projects to minimize the duplication of efforts to achieve a common goal.

### **Challenges Faced during School-Community Partnerships**

It is without fail that partnerships often coincide with challenges. However, the ultimate test for the strength of a partnership can be exhibited in how these challenges are recognized, managed, and minimized moving forward. Participants outlined their own personal challenges that they have encountered during school-community partnerships. They are as follows:

#### **1) Less Opportunities in Rural Communities**

- Small villages can experience limited growth opportunities as they may not have access to the same resources or facilities as large cities.

## 2) Financial Challenges

- Schools do not receive any financial compensation from community groups to cover the costs of damaged equipment.
- Changes, withdraw, or completion of grant funding support (i.e., a grant that once funded a healthy initiative in the school is no longer available or has run out; thus causing the initiative to be terminated).

## 3) Apprehensive School Staff

- School staff and teachers already have a full course load to manage and may become uneasy with taking on additional activities.
- School staff perceive the use of their school as a privilege to the community. Disrespectful community groups cause greater issues and unnecessary stress.

## 4) Lack of Buy-In

- Parents occasionally disagree with school initiatives or fundraising projects which causes pushback and confrontation.
- High-level policies and district administration may limit school-community partnership initiatives as they may not fit within the traditional ways or roles of a school.

### **Objective 3) Outline the implications and importance of school-community partnerships.**

Engaging in a partnership involves various stages of learning. These lessons learnt are vital pieces of information that should be applied to future projects and partnerships. All participants valued the importance of school-community partnerships and expressed various take-away messages:

- *“The schools can’t do it alone. There must be others at the table that are willing to step up and assist the schools.”* (Participant quote)
- The students learn valuable life skills as a result of school-community partnerships, such as leadership, empathy and compassion, value in giving back to others, and the overall importance of adopting a healthy lifestyle.
- *“Our students do not learn well sitting at desks in rows, and rows and rows. They work better if they have opportunities to engage in real life situations with real life people. As such, we need someone to take charge and challenge the norms; someone who isn’t afraid of the challenge to implement healthy initiatives.”* (Participant quote)
- *“The schools don’t work in isolation of communities. If we are all supporting the same mandate to increase health and wellness within our society, we should be collaborating!”* (Participant quote)

## ***Objective 4) Provide recommendations on how to foster successful future school-community partnerships.***

Participants provided endless opportunistic and unique ideas on how to strengthen and foster successful school-community partnerships in the future. Below is a snapshot of some of their ideas:

- *“It takes the village, right to raise the child.”* (Participant quote). Include a variety of multidisciplinary organizations in the partnership to generate multiple perspectives and access to multiple environments.
- When possible, bring in outside resources, such as someone to teach yoga classes or run nutrition student workshops. This prevents teachers from feeling overwhelmed and overworked.
- Be transparent about fund allocation. Having the breakdown of funds available to the public can increase initiative buy-in and support from others.
- Strive to be innovative about finding inexpensive ways to partner and provide hands-on learning experiences for the students. For instance, purchase and plant local vegetables in Rubbermaid containers and have students partner with community volunteers to learn about horticulture.
- Every school district and school is different. *“What works for one district will not work for another district. Projects have to match what their needs are, the resources that they have available, and the culture that already exists within their school.”* (Participant quote)
- Attempt to foresee potential barriers or challenges, and engage in forward thinking to minimize those challenges beforehand.
- Remember that partnerships are always a work in progress. They require constant learning, innovation to create opportunities to leverage together, a balance of give and take, patience as the partnership grows, perseverance during hardships, constant concentrated efforts, and recognition that we’re stronger together.

### **Summary**

*“Schools are working hard to ensure ideas like proper nutrition, active living, and positive social environments, are happening in each school to the best of the ability that the school has. However, we couldn’t provide the opportunities that we give to kids without the financial commitment, volunteer’s time commitment, professional expertise and knowledge, and valuable skill sets of the community. These opportunities are all a result from the collaborate framework of school-community partnerships.”* (Participant quote)