

SHAPING THE FUTURE CONFERENCE:

Engaging Parents in Healthy School Communities Session: January 27, 2012.
(Discussion feedback from session participants.)

Challenges and Successes.

Table 1 challenge: Communication and cultural barriers

1. Communication and cultural barriers. The families of my school are German speaking and Mennonite.
2. A lot of parents not getting on board, with the no treat idea, i.e.: no candy.
3. Rumor mill-misinformation about CSH programs getting started through gossip and getting parent's guard up before program even starts. i.e.: parents were thinking that only whole grain bread allowed in school, all other breads sent home?
4. To engage parents to move away from traditional "fun lunch" & move towards healthier choices or non-food "fun" activity.
5. Lower socio-economic areas: parents don't have time, or sometimes interest. English as a Second Language (ESL)/communication barriers.
6. Parent Councils – encouraging to follow school model of CSH – don't always want to especially with regards to healthy eating.
7. Parents not understanding and challenging no occasional treats (food rewards) policy.
8. Parent Council Fundraiser Activities. In our first year as an Alberta Project Promoting Active Living and Healthy Eating (APPLE) School our Parent Council decided to have a Purdy's Chocolate Fundraiser in the school.

Table 1 success:

1. Parent sponsored school based community healthy school breakfast (promoting connectedness and a healthy start).
2. Inviting parents into my classroom to join in celebrations.
3. Parent Council meetings – can reach parents through meetings.
4. Working with school council chairs initially.
5. Five parents joined the APPLE Core group to give input into how an APPLE school operates at our school.
6. Having parents try a salad bar activity for a "fun lunch".
7. Child care helps free up parents. Money for this came from a Wellness Grant.
8. Some parents come in to the school and support our healthy lifestyles.
9. Have a meeting/discussion with principal, parent nurse and health promoting schools coordinator regarding health issues in the school.

Table 2 challenge: Eating Habits: school (staff, school food programs) and at home (parents). Connecting with parents in a meaningful way.

1. Getting staff to bring healthier snacks to school staff room and getting parents to pack healthier lunches.
2. Parent Council wants to make profits and have been resistant to change. i.e. hot lunches (hot dogs, etc)
3. Always see same parents.
4. Making healthy eating and active living a priority at home.
5. Connecting with parents in a meaningful way that doesn't always include asking for volunteer time.
6. Eating habits i.e. hot lunches.
7. Having the parents pack good lunches. My struggle is not activity as we are an active school. It is eating habits and activities for kids outside of school.

Table 2 success:

1. My school has an amazing Parent Council who is very involved in the school community as well as health promotion by working with me to create a healthy hot lunch menu.
2. Support for providing funds for "industrial" blenders to promote "smoothies" at our canteen.
3. Health Promotion Coordinator getting on the agenda of a council of School Councils (district parents) meeting. (But it took time to find out who to connect with).
4. I promote and reward healthy food choices in my classroom which ends up being reflected at home.
5. Parents willing to work towards improving hot lunch menus by development of hot lunch vision explored out sourcing, nutrition in-services.
6. Students are bringing healthier lunches, so parents (most) are becoming aware of healthier eating.
7. Fitness – cardio activities.
8. After school events work well.
9. One school has a coffee club which involves parents meeting at school in am – the school facilitates and outlines topics to discuss & plan.

Table 3 challenge: Engaging hard to reach families with barriers to participation in school events and activities.

1. Not all families come to family activity evenings. How do we reach the families not attending the family evenings? (I.e. time not available).
2. Double income families that can't afford the time to work with their kids.
3. Language barriers, work schedules (working 2 + jobs), beliefs, values, time.
4. Providing opportunities for all parents to feel like they can contribute something, anything.
5. Getting volunteers for ongoing day-time activities/initiatives.
6. Reaching the most needed, language barrier, time
7. Engaging parents and having support and buy in of the initiative. Consistent parental engagement/support.
8. We have a very transient community and usually people come to work in this community. So, finding times where parents can get involved is a challenge.
9. The same parents are always there, there are very few opportunities when "new" parents get involved in what is happening within the school.
10. Few parents come watch home games.
11. I have difficulty with getting parents to provide transportation so that students can attend other events.

Table 3 success:

1. I did a skipping mini-unit in my grade 1 physical education class. One girl in my class went home and asked for a skipping rope for Christmas and she received one.
2. Parents approached us on how to ensure to create a healthy "holiday" meal they followed the guidelines and served 500+ people.
3. Physical Education open house during parent/teacher conferences.
4. Family Fun Night. Once a month we invite families to come out and be active in the school. The first night we hosted over 100 people who turned up 😊 Fundraiser: Active Live-A-thon.
5. Feeling as though I was a valued member of the school community.

Table 4 challenge: Educating and reaching out to parents beyond Parent Advisory Councils.

1. Reaching the parents that need the most help in health promotion topics.
2. How to get basic information about wellness to parents beyond school council.
3. Engaging parents beyond the Parent Advisory Council's (PAC'S).
4. Getting parents to utilize/read the resources available (newsletter, websites, etc.).
5. Communicating effectively to parents in a large, bureaucratic system - big school board).
6. Waiting for consensus and movement of the process.
7. Getting all parents on board with the importance of physical activity and plenty of rest. Also, a variety of healthy foods so their children eat all their lunch.
8. Parents are busy. It's the keen parents who come to parent/teacher meetings. How do we engage the others? The keen parents are asking for ideas about how they can reach out to other parents.
9. (Maintaining – following through). Getting parents of our challenging students (socio/economic) to engage in their child's wellness and education.
10. Parents are already so overwhelmed with just providing basics that they are not interested in school or anything to do with. (I work in a poverty area with many high needs families).
11. The parent teacher interviews have been historically /un-attended and getting any volunteers in is such a struggle.
12. Parent education – How do we include/educate parents who are too busy to be a part of the school community?
13. Getting more parents to buy in.
14. Getting parents to realize that we are not criticizing what they are doing but asking them to see another perspective. How can we most effectively get them to be open-minded?
15. Communicating importance. Challenging beliefs of parents and other.
16. This is a generic challenge but having parents buy toothbrushes and toothpaste, and healthy snacks for their children. We have a program at my school where students are given time to have a healthy snack & brush their teeth.
17. Parents struggle to commit the time that is necessary to make a change where it is necessary.

Table 4 success:

1. Recruited many parents during "meet the teacher" night to be a part of an APPLE core group which works to develop yearly plans/goals.
2. Having the PAC realize that we are all on the same team.
3. Hosting family activity evenings at school, Zumba Night, Mission Impossible Night, Dance Night, Inline Skating Night, Drumming Night.
4. School feasts.
5. Engaging Parents. Parents volunteer to run a school hot lunch program.
6. I organized our Terry Fox Run this fall & parents were welcome to come and participate. I'm the Activity Director – (AD) at our school, so having great communication with ways parents can be involved.

7. Dramatic presentations and our first Family Fun Night brought out about 70% of family – (food was provided).
8. Parents that do get involved at the school got involved in many different things.
9. Anytime the students perform (Christmas Concert, Talent Show) we get many parents & families in the school.
10. Developed specialized parent workshop for wellness promoting parenting strategies.
11. Parent involvement with attending Healthy Active Schools Symposia (HASS).
12. MC school activities & assemblies. Including active living & wellness... Awareness. Parent Involvement.
13. Partner with project. i.e.: Mental Health Capacity Building Projects (MHCBP).

Table 5 challenge:

1. Parent knowledge of what is a healthy school environment?
2. High school parents – involved but less so around “wellness” component – concerns on course availability – diploma/pat – instruction.
3. Parents feel like they are being preached to; regarding; healthy eating.

Table 5 success:

1. Including parents in school – based health inquiry teams has been a very positive experience. Means of involvement/education.
2. When a parent acknowledged that changing people’s mindsets towards a healthy school community for the majority takes a long time but that it’s worth persevering.

How Can Parent Involvement Be Supported?

By the School Districts

Second language support; Sit in on interviews of staff; Accommodating new Canadian parents and double income families with out of school support – education etc...; District Parent Council of Council events; Allow school staff to have flex time to attend their own children’s activities; Give parents support & education instead of just volunteer opportunity; Engage parents at decision making at district level; Having a well-maintained and up to date website – at least for information; Regular newsletters to parents; Simplified communication on needs and expectations of parents; 4 year sustainability plan for collaboration and partnerships with parents and community.

By the School Staff

Enforce that this movement is a culture change – no one is “stupid or bad” – new concept let’s learn together. Compare to smoking movement & culture change – took time, changed schools etc..; Classroom invites; More fun nights to help parents become more comfortable at the school. Especially important for new Canadian families.; Invite parents to participate in non-traditional events/activities i.e. (moving from Grade 9 – high school events); Specific tasks that parents can choose; Specific tasks for parents – so those who have less time to give can also participate; Ask parents for skills that they could share; Create a bank of resources/skills; Offer a variety of opportunities with various degrees of commitment and job tasks; Recognition of all levels of engagement from reading newsletter to volunteering; Be very flexible and welcoming; Saturday interviews or activities for working parents; Welcome other family members to come in at secondary level with parents wishing help in the classroom; Build relationships with parents in informal settings; Positive communications – build relationships; Celebrate involvement of parents; Teachers can take focus of a conversation away from student to parent focus; Inviting/welcoming school environment; Being thankful; Say “thank-you” at every opportunity; Assemblies, recognition events/meals for volunteer parents; Inclusion/involvement of PAC members – try to avoid “clique-iness” – bring in guest speakers to assist with educating the parents on an aspect of the school/education; take the time to connect and get to know those parent-volunteers.

By the Parent Advisory Council (PAC)

Volunteer incentives; Provide parents with opportunities to participate outside of work hours; Parent Council guest speaker session with topics relevant to parents; Offer parents guest speakers. Etc; Provide childcare for parents; Provide snacks; Parent/volunteer appreciation thank-you cards; Ask parents for their input for the date and time of Parent Advisory Council meetings; PAC members need to change their focus a bit from in-school support to reaching out to the other parents – i.e. bring in guest speakers for the parents.

By Health Partners (Alberta Health Services, etc.)?

Health partners came in to speak to group of parents; We would like to speak to more! - Please contact your local Health Promotion Coordinator(s) at HealthyWeightsTeam@albertahealthsservices.ca.