

Developing and Implementing Effective Healthy School Policies

Overview and purpose

As part of the comprehensive school health (CSH) approach, policies can effectively promote positive health behaviours including, but not limited to: healthy eating, active living and positive mental health. Policies shape the culture of a school community by defining values, beliefs, and acceptable standards and expected actions. Policies can effect change within a school community and formalize what is already happening. For more information on school health policies, see the *Healthy School Policy: What is it and why is it important?* resource^a.

This guide describes key evidence-based¹⁻² components of effectively written school health policies. It also includes better practices for policy development and implementation. This guide will be useful to those responsible for creating and reviewing school health policies. The conversation starters can facilitate dialogue to ensure best practices are being followed.

'Policies'

In the context of this document, the term **'policy'** is used to refer to policies as well as related documents, such as administrative or operational procedures and regulations.

Policy Development	Written Policy	Policy Implementation
 <p>Developing school health policies requires a well-planned process that engages all stakeholders who will be affected by the policies. Clear leadership and a committed team, consideration of current practices and policy options, and ongoing stakeholder engagement throughout development contribute to more effective health policies³.</p>	 <p>Effective school health policies are well-structured, clearly written and provide enough detail and specificity to guide the actions of those individuals responsible for their implementation. Evidence indicates that the content, detail and language used are key determinants of the implementation and effectiveness of the policies. Policies can be written to support implementation and achievement of desired outcomes⁴.</p>	 <p>Implementation of policies requires careful planning, supportive resources and clear communication with all relevant stakeholders. Policies are intended to directly inform and change practices, circumstances, and activities in a specific setting, which can be challenging in a school environment⁵. The quality of school health policy implementation determines its level of influence on practices within schools and eventual improvements in student health.</p>

^a To find more information about healthy school policy, visit www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page7124.aspx

THE POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

There are many important steps in developing a policy. Use the following better practices and conversation starters to help guide you through the policy development process.

BETTER PRACTICES	CONVERSATION STARTERS
<p>POLICY DEVELOPMENT LEADER AND TEAM</p> <p>Choose a leader who is trusted and respected within the jurisdiction and has the capacity and skill to facilitate the process. Form a working group or committee to work on policy development. Include members with a broad range of skills and perspectives who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • will implement the policy • will be directly affected by the policy • show an interest in the policy • have expertise on the policy area of focus • are in a position to approve the policy 	<p>How will we choose a leader?</p> <p>What different perspectives should be represented on the working group?</p>
<p>ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT STATE</p> <p>A thorough understanding of current practices and perspectives related to the policy focus area is helpful in defining the scope and objectives of the policy. Collecting data prior to the development of a policy can support evaluation plans in the future by establishing a baseline. Existing or new data can be gathered (e.g., information collected to inform jurisdiction plans).</p> <p>Sources of information that may be helpful include: school health assessment results (e.g., <i>Joint Consortium for School Health - Healthy School Planner</i>); school or jurisdiction survey data or reporting information related to current knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and practices; or research studies.</p>	<p>What information is available?</p> <p>What data sources will we use to inform our policy?</p>
<p>DISCUSSION OF POLICY ALTERNATIVES AND FEASIBILITY</p> <p>This discussion should be informed by the assessment of the current state. It may include a review of similar policies from other jurisdictions to identify possible policy alternatives and the pros and cons of each approach. Relevant evidence-based guidelines are also important for identifying effective approaches that can be used within policies (see examples in the <i>Core Elements of Written Policy</i> section below).</p>	<p>Is a policy the right approach? What are some alternatives?</p>

THE POLICY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS (continued)

BETTER PRACTICES

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

It is important to engage students, parents, teachers, administrators and health representatives in policy development (and anyone else who might be affected by the proposed policy). Stakeholder engagement can occur throughout the policy development process. Examples of stakeholder engagement activities could include:

- identifying policy objectives
- brainstorming policy alternatives
- evaluating or prioritizing policy alternatives
- reviewing draft policy (or parts of the policy)

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Who needs to be engaged throughout development of this policy?

When will we engage different stakeholders?

How will we engage these stakeholders?

CORE ELEMENTS OF WRITTEN POLICIES

The following better practices will support your team in developing an effective written policy. Use the conversation starters to consider all of the core elements and how they can be incorporated into your policy.

PLEASE NOTE: Some of the conversation starters can be considered while writing the policy and others may be more applicable during policy revisions or regular review.

BETTER PRACTICES	CONVERSATION STARTERS
<p>ACCESSIBILITY</p> <p>Ensure the policy is available to all affected stakeholders in print and electronic format.</p>	<p>Where will stakeholders be able to access the policy?</p>
<p>HIGH-LEVEL GOAL</p> <p>The goal or policy statement communicates the purpose of the policy and what it is intended to achieve. It can be helpful to align the policy goal with the jurisdiction's overarching vision or mission to show how the policy contributes to the jurisdiction's core mandate. It is helpful to present the goal explicitly at the beginning of the policy.</p>	<p>How does the goal or policy statement align with your jurisdiction's mission, vision and core mandate?</p>
<p>BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE</p> <p>Relevant background information provides policy users with context necessary to understand and apply the policy. This information may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • data/statistics on the current state • a description of the health issue and its link to student success • definitions of terms used within the policy • information about related school jurisdiction policies or initiatives as well as relevant legislation <p>If there is a large number of definitions, it can be helpful to include them at the end of the policy or as an appendix to ensure that the core actions/procedures within the policy remain the focal point.</p>	<p>How does the background information support the policy user in understanding the rationale for the policy?</p>

CORE ELEMENTS OF WRITTEN POLICIES (continued)

BETTER PRACTICES

CONVERSATION STARTERS

SPECIFIC AND EVIDENCE-BASED PROCEDURES

Procedures should clearly outline the expectations and required actions for end users (those responsible for the actions). Include specific and evidence-based actions and procedures that are required for policy implementation. Depending on processes within the jurisdiction, these actions may be described within the policy or within an accompanying administrative procedure/regulation. Evidence-based guidelines can be used to inform the development of actions and procedures. Examples of such guidelines include:

- *The Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities, and Gender Expressions* (Alberta Education)
- *The Daily Physical Activity Handbook* (Alberta Education)
- *The Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth* (Alberta Health)
- *The Positive Mental Health Toolkit* (Joint Consortium for School Health)
- *The Handbook for Building Healthy School Communities* (Alberta Healthy School Community Wellness Fund)

What evidence-based guidelines will we use to inform the procedures in the policy?

CLEAR ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ACTIONS

The written policy (or procedure) should clarify who is responsible for implementing various components of the policy, ideally at an individual level (e.g., by position/role). Consider the responsibilities for policy implementation at all levels, including school and jurisdiction-level roles.

Roles that jurisdiction-level staff can play in supporting policy implementation may include: communicating policy requirements; partnering with external groups to access resources, information and supportive programming; participating in research and disseminating best practices/success stories across the jurisdiction; facilitating professional learning and training opportunities; and providing guidance and consultation to school-level staff regarding policy implementation.

Who will be responsible for implementing the policy (e.g., superintendent, principal, teachers, students, parents)?

TIMELINES FOR ACTION

Specifying timelines for required actions within the policy helps to support implementation and accountability.

What are the implications if timelines for the required action are not met?

CORE ELEMENTS OF WRITTEN POLICIES (continued)

BETTER PRACTICES	CONVERSATION STARTERS
<p>CONSIDERATION OF RISKS AND FEASIBILITY</p> <p>Consider the risks and potential barriers to policy implementation. Include risks within the policy and strategies to mitigate where possible.</p>	<p>What are the risks and/or barriers to implementing our policy?</p> <p>How can these risks and/or barriers be reduced and/or eliminated?</p>
<p>MONITORING AND EVALUATION PLANS</p> <p>A monitoring plan is used to determine progress towards full policy implementation. Policies should state when the document was first approved and when it is next scheduled for review. A well-planned evaluation can be used to determine whether the policy has achieved its purpose and to identify opportunities for improvement (e.g., provide support for implementation or conduct future policy revisions).</p> <p>Both monitoring and evaluation plans should describe how and when the policy will be monitored and evaluated, and who is responsible for these processes. Timelines should be realistic in terms of when observed changes or implementation progress would be observed. Strategies for monitoring and evaluating policy implementation can be integrated with existing jurisdiction processes, such as year-end/accountability reporting. As noted under <i>Assessment of the Current State</i>, above, collecting data prior to policy implementation can support stronger monitoring and evaluation because it provides the opportunity to observe changes over time.</p>	<p>Who is responsible for evaluating the policy and its implementation?</p> <p>How will we know this policy is being implemented?</p> <p>What data sources can we use to measure effectiveness?</p>
<p>STRONG LANGUAGE</p> <p>Using strong language in a written policy can support more effective implementation. Words like “consider”, “may”, “encourage”, “promote”, and “work towards” are not as strong as words like “will”, “shall”, “must” and have an effect on the potential enforceability of the policy.</p>	<p>What type of language will we use in our policy?</p> <p>Are there aspects of the policy that could be misinterpreted? Is there an opportunity to strengthen the language?</p> <p>How will the language used impact implementation of our policy?</p>

CORE ELEMENTS OF WRITTEN POLICIES (continued)

BETTER PRACTICES

STRUCTURE AND CLARITY⁶⁻⁷

Clear writing and logical structure supports policy users in understanding and applying the contents of the policy to practice. For example:

- Use headings to organize content into logical sections and introduce key points.
- Break up paragraphs with bulleted or numbered lists, and ensure there is adequate white space on the document.
- Be as concise as possible and avoid repeating information.
- Write using the active voice, present tense and a positive tone.
- Use language that is simple enough to be understood by all stakeholders expected to read and apply the policy.
- Include points that are factual and objective (as opposed to opinion-based statements).
- Avoid including information that will become outdated quickly.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

What strategies have we used to ensure that those impacted by the policy can understand and apply it?

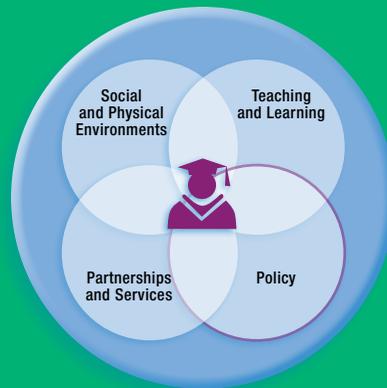
POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Ideally, policy implementation plans should be considered during the development of the policy rather than once the policy is already written. Use the conversation starters below to help you develop your plans and ensure that they are actionable.

BETTER PRACTICES	CONVERSATION STARTERS
<p>COMMUNICATION PLAN</p> <p>A formal written communication plan that outlines key target audiences and communication strategies for reaching those audiences will help to support implementation. Key messages can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the purpose of the policy • rationale for its development • actions required/recommended for various policy users • timelines for implementation <p>Multiple communication methods help to ensure that policy users are aware of and understand required changes. Example communication strategies may include: email/website announcements; letters to parents; memos/briefing notes; presentations at school council or principal meetings; school announcements; training sessions; and events to launch the policy.</p>	<p>Who will our policy impact?</p> <p>What are the key messages that should be included in our communication plan?</p> <p>How will we communicate our policy?</p>
<p>DISCUSSION OF ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES</p> <p>It is important that the individuals who are responsible for implementing the policy know what is expected of them. Having designated school health champions/coordinators and wellness teams in place can provide a mechanism for facilitating policy implementation at the school level.</p>	<p>How will those responsible for implementing our policy be supported to do so?</p>
<p>RESOURCES TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION</p> <p>Required resources to support implementation may be noted in the policy or elsewhere. Consider the resources that will be required to support effective policy implementation. Examples may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • funding for physical changes in the school or to support supportive programs/resources • professional learning or training • staff time to plan and implement changes 	<p>What resources are needed to implement our policy?</p>

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION (continued)

BETTER PRACTICES	CONVERSATION STARTERS
<p>REGULAR REVIEW</p> <p>A policy should be reviewed on a regular, defined basis to determine appropriateness and need for ongoing updates. Many school jurisdictions have a standard review timeframe for all policies and procedures.</p>	<p>When will we review this policy?</p> <p>Who should be involved in the review process?</p>
<p>COMPLEMENTARY STRATEGIES ALIGNED WITH COMPONENTS OF COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL HEALTH (CSH)</p> <p>CSH is an evidence-based approach to improve student health^b. Policy is one component of this approach. A policy will be more effective if it is used concurrently with strategies from the other three components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching and Learning • Social and Physical Environments • Partnerships and Services <p>These strategies may be built into a comprehensive policy, but might also be planned separately. Creating a policy implementation plan is recommended to capture all specific strategies that will be used to support the policy's implementation.</p>	<p>What other strategies are being implemented that complement this policy?</p>



^b To find more information about the comprehensive school health approach, visit www.ahs.ca/csh

References

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