

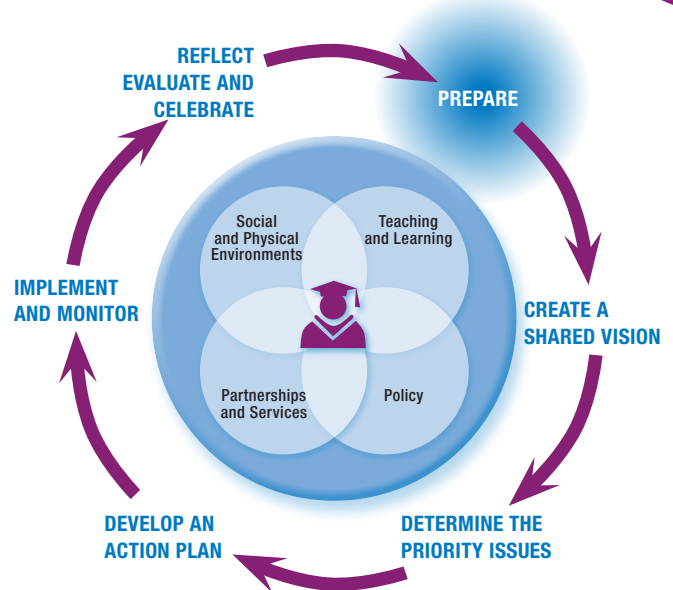
Health Champions and School Health Teams: Leaders in Building Healthy School Communities

A healthy school community is one that supports the wellness of all its members (e.g., students, teachers, staff and parents) and strives to be a healthy setting for living, learning and working. Comprehensive School Health (CSH) is an effective approach for building healthy school communities. Identifying health champions and forming a school health team are important parts of the process for developing healthy school communities¹ (see diagram). This resource describes the roles of health champions and school health teams in supporting school health initiatives.

Health Champions

“Health champions” refer to the people who take a lead role in facilitating activities related to health and wellness within the school community. They connect the school to existing resources and identify other supports that may be needed. Although health champions lead the way, it is important that they share the workload with other staff, volunteers and members of the school health team.

Anyone can take on the role of health champion (e.g., staff members, administrators, parents, students). It is not assumed or expected that these individuals are experts in the field of health. A passion to guide the school health team as they build a healthier school community is all that is required to be a successful health champion.



Process for Building Healthy School Communities using the Components of Comprehensive School Health

(Adapted from the Alberta Healthy School Community Wellness Fund)

Health champions can take on a variety of roles, including

- increasing awareness and knowledge of health and wellness within their school community
- coordinating meetings and agendas for the school health team
- working with the school health team to ensure that an annual assessment occurs, a plan is created and activities are carried out
- acting as key contacts for external partners such as Alberta Health Services (AHS), the Alberta Healthy School Community Wellness Fund and Ever Active Schools
- establishing communication channels with key stakeholders (both internal and external)
- taking part in professional development and training opportunities
- advocating for health and wellness in their school and school jurisdiction

¹ For more information about the process for building healthy school communities, visit <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/7123.asp>.

An example of a health champion

In a rural Alberta school, a teacher took on the role of health champion. She worked with her administrator and a group of students to assess what they were doing well and what they needed to improve upon with respect to school health. During the assessment, a number of people indicated an interest in helping with tasks identified in the action plan.

The health champion and administrator called the first meeting. They invited their contact from AHS to help the school health team identify strategies and create a plan.

During the course of the year, this health champion provided leadership by

- organizing regular meetings
- ensuring that all stakeholders received regular communication (including updates at staff and parent council meetings)
- working with the school health team to insert regular health tidbits in the school newsletter
- liaising with key external partners (e.g., AHS)

Recognizing that student involvement was minimal, this health champion explored options for increasing student engagement. She now offers a leadership option course in each term.

The School Health Team

A school health team is a group of people who are interested in improving the health and well-being of their school community. They work together to plan and carry out activities to help build a healthy school community.

Why is a school health team important?

School health teams ensure that the wellness activities within a school reflect the needs and interests of all members of the school community. Initiatives that are planned and coordinated by a school health team are more sustainable and more likely to be well-received than initiatives planned and carried out by only one or a few people. School health teams can generate energy and buy-in among school community members and help make it clear that the school is committed to student and staff wellness.

What does a school health team do?

A school health team is responsible for

- providing leadership and direction for health initiatives in the school community
- identifying the most important priorities related to health and wellness by talking with members of the school community and completing a school health assessment, such as the Healthy School Planner Tool or the Healthy Schools Rubrics²
- creating a plan of action to address key priority areas identified by the school
- recruiting students, parents and staff to support school health initiatives
- carrying out the action plan and checking to see if it is improving the school environment
- celebrating and sharing information about the great work happening in the school community and the successes achieved throughout the year

² For more information about school health assessments, and for links to these assessment tools, visit <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/7123.asp>.

Who should be a part of my school health team?

The school health team should include people who represent all of the different voices within your school community. It's a good idea to include

- students
- teachers
- other school staff (e.g., educational assistants, librarians, counsellors)
- school administrators
- parents
- community partners (e.g., local businesses, recreation departments, AHS staff, community organizations, service clubs)



How Do We Get Started?

1. **Get a group together.** You may have an existing group, such as a student leadership club, or you may be starting a new one. In either case, it's important that all members of the school community are represented at the table. Recruit team members by making school announcements, sending letters home, including information in school newsletters or the school handbook, providing information at school events (e.g., orientation nights and parent-teacher interviews) or hosting a launch event that attracts students and gets them interested. You might consider a nomination process as a way of encouraging involvement from students who may be less involved in other school activities.
2. **Make sure everyone is on the same page.** Discuss what it means to be a healthy school community with your team. One idea is to have all group members answer the question, What does a healthy school community look like to you? Taking time to agree on the same goal or vision leads to actions that are more coordinated and effective for improving health and wellness in the school.³
3. **Get to know your team.** Recognize the unique skills and experience that each team member brings to the table. This will help you work together throughout the year. Use icebreaker activities at your meetings to create an atmosphere where all team members feel comfortable sharing their ideas.⁴
4. **Create group expectations.** Take time to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each team member, how often and for how long you will meet, and how the group will make decisions if there is a difference of opinion. Write this information down so the group can refer back to it during the school year.

³ For more information about creating a shared vision and for visioning activities, visit <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/7123.asp>.

⁴ For sample icebreaker activities, visit <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/7123.asp>.

An example of a school health team

After discussions with staff, students and parents, one Alberta school set up three school health committees to focus on different priority areas: the Healthy Food Committee, the Active Living Committee and the Safe and Caring School Committee.

How did they do it?

The school health champion and administrators invited multiple stakeholders to be involved in their school health assessment and then broadly invited people to participate on the school health team. There was enough interest to form multiple committees. Instead of turning people away, three committees were created to take advantage of the skills, interest and talents of all volunteers.

On an annual basis, the committees review their assessments, modify and adjust their plans and recruit new members. Each committee is led by a school staff member and meets on a regular basis. The committee leaders connect throughout the year to share and provide updates on their plans. In addition, committee updates are provided in the school newsletter on a regular basis.

What were the results?

Over the past four years, the Healthy Food Committee has transformed the foods available in their vending machines and canteen. Healthy snacks are available every day to all students, and the hot lunch committee provides healthy, homemade lunches once a month.

The Active Living Committee has worked with staff and community members to provide opportunities for all students, parents and staff members to be active. These activities include yoga and fitness classes offered before school and during the lunch hour. Over 85% of students from this high school are now involved with extra-curricular teams.

The Safe and Caring School Committee supports initiatives that are creating healthier relationships within the school. Examples include supporting theme days and organizing a week-long service project to assist in fall clean-up projects in the community. The team also selects an international service project each year. They recently helped provide fresh water for two schools in Kenya.