

Healthy School Policy: What is it and why is it important?

The Comprehensive School Health (CSH) approach supports student health and educational success. This approach involves using the six-step community development process and strategies related to the four pillars of CSH to address health priorities (see Figure 1). This process can help a school or school jurisdiction decide whether healthy school policy is an appropriate strategy to address its health priorities.

This resource describes what healthy school policy is and how it can contribute to healthy school communities. Although this resource focuses on the Healthy School Policy pillar, it is important to remember that actions addressing all four pillars are needed to build healthy school communities. More information about the CSH approach can be found at www.albertahealthservices.ca/csh.asp.

In this resource, the term *policy* is used broadly to describe policies, administrative procedures, administrative regulations, directives, guidelines and any other document that takes on a similar function. Schools and school jurisdictions all use different terms to describe their policies; you will want to investigate the language that describes policy within your school community.

Healthy School Policy is one of the four pillars of Comprehensive School Health.

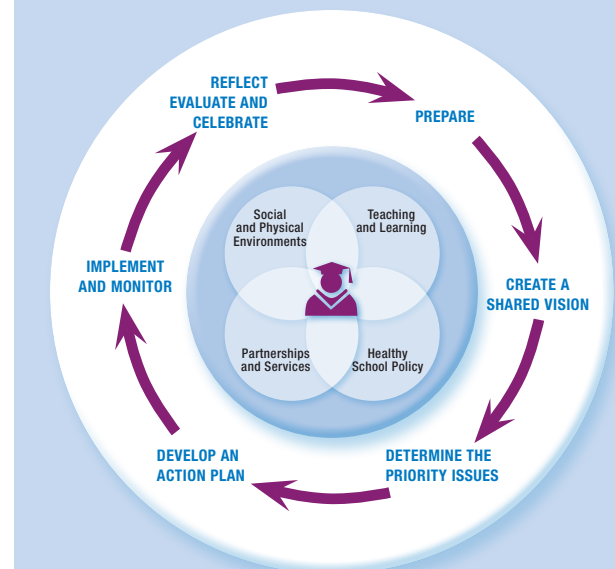


Figure 1

Process for Building Healthy School Communities, including the community development process (outer circle) and pillars of Comprehensive School Health (inner circles)¹

¹ Alberta Healthy School Community Wellness Fund. (2012). *Developing Healthy School Communities Handbook*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Healthy School Communities Wellness Fund. Retrieved from http://wellnessfund.ualberta.ca/en/~media/abhealthyschools/Wellness_Fund_Handbook.pdf

What is Healthy School Policy?

A policy is “a plan of action agreed to by a group of people with the power to carry it out and enforce it.”² Policies shape the culture of a school community by defining values, beliefs, acceptable standards and expected actions. They influence how schools are run, what is taught and how teachers, students and parents interact.

Policy exists at multiple levels, from federal and provincial laws all the way to the personal values that people use to guide their actions. Schools and school jurisdictions use policies to manage a diverse range of issues. Healthy school policies may focus on specific health issues or be broadly focused on supporting student wellness in the school setting. Table 1 provides examples of policies at all levels within Alberta’s education system.

“Healthy School Policy” refers to the management practices, decision-making processes, rules, procedures and policies at all levels that promote health and well-being, and shape a respectful, welcoming and caring school environment.

Table 1
Examples of general policies and healthy school policies within Alberta’s education system

Level of the education system*	Examples of...	
	General policy	Healthy school policy
Provincial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alberta’s School Act • Alberta Education’s English as a Second Language policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alberta Education’s Daily Physical Activity policy
School jurisdiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies, administrative regulations, administrative procedures • Purchasing policies • Privacy policies (e.g., for student information) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies that encourage schools to adopt the CSH approach • Policies to promote safe and caring school communities • Policies to address specific health issues (e.g., nutrition, tobacco use and bullying)
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School discipline policies • Student handbooks outlining expectations for students and families • School dress codes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School-specific policies to address specific health issues • Including health goals in school improvement plans
Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom management policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy on using healthy or non-food-based classroom rewards

*Although policy can exist at all of these levels, this resource focuses mainly on school and school jurisdiction policies.

² Raine K. (2012, January). *Wellness Policy in Alberta Schools*. Presented at the Shaping the Future Pre-Conference, Kananaskis, AB.

Why is Healthy School Policy Important?

There are many ways that policies contribute to health and wellness within schools and jurisdictions. For example, healthy school policy can^{3,4,5}

- contribute to the overall or health-related vision of the school or school jurisdiction
- show parents and community members that the school or school jurisdiction is a leader in promoting student health and wellness
- help students and staff make healthier choices
- act as a guide for planning, carrying out and evaluating school health activities
- establish target goals for a school or school jurisdiction related to health and wellness
- drive positive change within a school or school jurisdiction by defining a culture of health and wellness
- reinforce existent positive practices related to health and wellness
- support health curriculum messages within the broader school environment
- promote sustainability of school health activities by ensuring that wellness is part of standard practices and procedures within school communities and not simply seen as a one-time project

Who is Involved in Creating and Supporting Healthy School Policies?

Many groups can **lead** the development of healthy school policy, including

- Alberta Education, which developed the Alberta Daily Physical Activity policy
 - Alberta Health, which created the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth to support school jurisdictions' policies and practices related to healthy eating
 - school jurisdictions, which have adopted policies related to student wellness; caring, respectful, and safe learning environments; nutrition; and the CSH approach
 - individual schools, which may incorporate healthy school policy into their mission statements, student handbooks, teachers' professional growth and development plans, or three-year education plans
- No matter who leads the creation of policy, many different stakeholders can be involved (see Table 2). It is important that the policy development process involves extensive consultation. When school community members have the chance to participate in policy development, they will be more likely to buy in to the final policy and less resistant to changes that may come out of it. Broad engagement supports successful adoption of the policy. There may be specific roles and responsibilities related to policy that are defined within schools and jurisdictions. It is a good idea to learn more about who is responsible for policy in your organization.

³ Queensland Health. (2008). *How to revise and develop policy*. Queensland, Australia: Queensland Health. Retrieved from <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/healthyschools/documents/29340.pdf>

⁴ Ontario Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance (ODCPA). (2011). *Handbook to Healthier Communities—Influencing Health Public Policies*. Toronto, ON: ODCPA. Retrieved from http://www.ocdpa.on.ca/ocdpa/docs/ocdpa_hctoolkit.pdf

⁵ Rural Communities Impacting Policy. (2002). *A Brief Guide to Understanding Policy Development*. Nova Scotia: Rural Communities Impacting Poverty. Retrieved from <http://www.ruralnovascotia.ca/documents/policy/understanding%20policy.pdf>

Table 2
Stakeholders who may be involved in developing healthy school policy

Stakeholders who may be involved	School-level Policies	Jurisdiction-level Policies
Students	✓	✓
Parents	✓	✓
Teachers	✓	✓
Administrators	✓	✓
Other staff or volunteers who work in or with school communities (e.g., noon-hour assistants, bus drivers, administrative assistants, custodians, community members)	✓	✓
AHS staff (e.g., public health nurses, health promotion facilitators or coordinators, school health facilitators or liaisons, content experts like dietitians or mental health promotion facilitators)	✓	✓
Community organizations or partners (e.g., physical activity organizations, breakfast programs, recreation centres, local businesses, town council representatives)	✓	✓
Jurisdiction consultants or coordinators (e.g., health and physical education consultants, curriculum consultants)		✓
Representatives from various jurisdiction departments (e.g., communications, vendor relationship, facilities management)		✓
Superintendents or assistant superintendents		✓
Trustees		✓

How Does Healthy School Policy Fit Within the CSH Approach?

As described above, the CSH approach involves using the community development process and strategies related to the four pillars of CSH to address priority health issues.

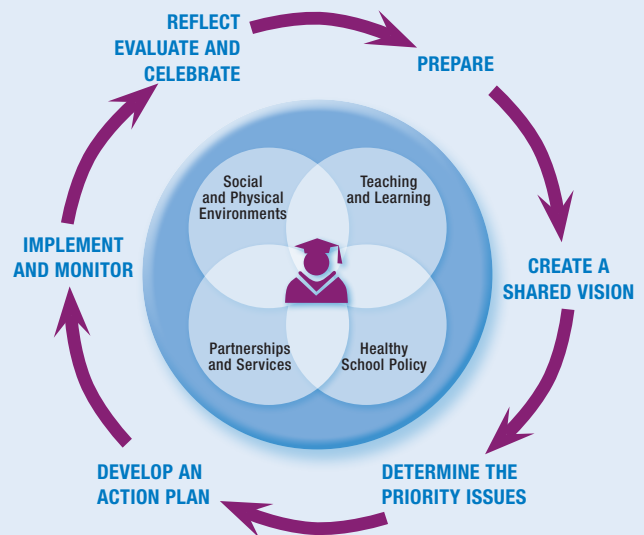
Boxes 1 and 2 provide examples of how a school jurisdiction and a school might use the CSH approach to coordinate actions related to one priority health issue.

Box 1

Example of school jurisdiction-level healthy school policy in the context of the CSH approach

- After coming together to achieve a shared understanding of their purpose, the school jurisdiction's wellness advisory committee surveys all schools to learn more about their needs related to creating healthy school communities.
- Through this survey, the jurisdiction wellness committee finds that schools need support to create their own school health teams, to complete school health assessments and to develop action plans. Schools want to know that the jurisdiction supports them in using this approach.
- The jurisdiction wellness committee develops an action plan that includes strategies related to all four pillars to address this need.
 - To show its commitment to the CSH approach, the jurisdiction develops and approves a policy that requires all schools to complete a school health assessment and set at least one goal related to student health and wellness each year.
 - To support schools in implementing the jurisdiction policy, the jurisdiction partners with Alberta Health Services and Ever Active Schools to provide all schools with training and tools to support them in forming a school health team and completing a school health assessment.
 - To help schools carry out their action plans and improve their environments, the jurisdiction applies for an Alberta Healthy School Community Wellness Fund Grant to support sustainable changes within schools that support healthy behaviours.

By creating this action plan and communicating these actions with all schools, the jurisdiction supports individual schools in facilitating the CSH approach.



Box 2

Example of school-level healthy school policy in the context of the CSH approach

- Led by a passionate teacher and the school administrator, members of the school wellness team decide to complete a school health assessment to learn more about what their priorities for action could be for the upcoming school year.
- When the wellness team reviews the school health assessment results related to healthy eating, they notice that they improved the school nutrition environment by
 - working with external food suppliers, a public health dietitian and noon-hour staff to create a new healthy menu for the school cafeteria
 - lengthening the lunch hour to provide students enough time to enjoy their lunch and socialize with their peers
 - incorporating healthy eating challenges into classroom activities throughout the year to promote healthy food choices at school and at home
- The school health team recognizes that a school healthy eating policy would help to formalize the successful strategies used to improve healthy eating and ensure that these practices continue in the future.
 - The school health team develops a healthy eating policy and procedures using feedback from students, parents and teachers as well as guidance from the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth.
 - The school ends up with a formal policy that builds on its existing practices related to school nutrition. It takes action to support the implementation of new practices and maintain existing practices specified in the policy.
 - The school shares its policy with neighbouring schools and the jurisdiction office to support widespread use of the practices that are now embedded in its school culture.

