

Principles for an Active Healthy School Community

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As new ideas and projects are developed, attention to key principles offer decision-makers both an interpretive lens and critical tool for making judgements about their initiative. Principles help to center on the fundamental or core values claimed to be upheld in our work. Principles enable us to avoid educational evangelism and quick fix remedies. Anchored in principles, we are better able to hold ourselves accountable to a higher standard.

The following principles for Active Healthy School Communities have been identified based on:

- 1) An international literature review of promising school health promotion practices,
- 2) Research that analyzes a systems-based approach to health-promoting schools,
- 3) Successes observed in local Ontario initiatives, and
- 4) Consultation with the World Health Organization (WHO).

PRINCIPLE # 1

Active Healthy School Communities have a school culture that understands health and uses it as an effective strategy for student achievement.

An Active Healthy School Community aims to improve student achievement and understands that health status is a resource for achievement. The concept of an Active Healthy School Community is based on the premise that *health and learning are inextricably interconnected* and that increasing focus on health, especially physical activity and nutrition, will create the conditions our students need for successful learning.

The WHO Collaborating Center to Promote Health Through Schools and Communities (Boston) has reviewed substantial research that shows the relationships among health, cognition, school participation, and academic achievement. Their *Education For All 2000* report reveals the following key findings:

1. School-based nutrition and health interventions can improve academic performance.
2. Students' health and nutrition status affects their enrolment, retention, and absenteeism.
3. Education benefits health.
4. Education can reduce social and gender inequities.
5. Health promotion for teachers benefits their health, morale, and quality of instruction.
6. Health promotion and disease prevention programs are cost-effective.
7. Treating youngsters in school can reduce disease in the community.
8. Multiple, coordinated strategies produce a greater effect than individual strategies. However, multiple strategies for any one audience must be targeted carefully.
9. Health education is most effective when it uses interactive methods in a skills-based approach.
10. Trained teachers delivering health education produce more significant outcomes in student health knowledge and skills than untrained teachers.

PRINCIPLE #2

Active Healthy School Communities have a school culture that values physical activity.

Physical activity increases cerebral blood flow, glucose uptake, and metabolism. Physical activity enhances the development of sophisticated perceptual and cognitive behaviours, heightens levels of alertness, increases capacity for improved concentration, increases self-efficacy and self-esteem, improves stress management, reduces disruptive behaviours, and improves math, reading and writing scores. Advocacy efforts for quality physical education and physical activity programs call for:

- All students to be active for most, if not all, of the scheduled physical education class;
- More time slots for compulsory physical education;
- More emphasis on a variety of lifelong, accessible and enjoyable activities such as aerobics and dance;
- A balance between competition and sport specific skill development, with time for free play, active games, and non-competitive supervised recreational activities;
- Opportunities to participate in a variety of individual and team oriented physical activity programs both in competitive and non-competitive formats. Research shows that non-competitive physical activity and recreation may generate the most gains for chronic disease prevention and citizenship skills;
- Greater coordination with recreation service providers to address issues related to space, supervision, and liability; and
- Enhanced after school activities for students, parents and staff.

PRINCIPLE #3

Active Healthy School Communities have a school culture that values healthy nutrition.

Poor diet is linked with reduced attention span, reduced short-term memory, reduced concentration, reduced reflective and analytical abilities, and low self-esteem. Evidence from around the world shows that treating nutritional and health conditions in school can improve academic performance. In Benin, children in schools with food services scored significantly higher on second-grade tests than did those in schools without food services. In Jamaica, providing breakfast to primary school students significantly increased attendance and arithmetic scores. In the United States, low-income children (before they participated in a school breakfast program) scored significantly lower on achievement tests than higher-income children. After the students began participating in the school breakfast program, their scores improved more than the scores of the non-participants.

Nutritional interventions such as micronutrient supplements and the treatment of intestinal worms have also been shown to increase students' attention, cognitive problem solving, and test scores.

Nutrition should be an important part of the school environment that includes:

- A comprehensive health curriculum;
- Nutrition services, breakfast programs, and healthy cafeteria menus;
- Student involvement in addressing their own nutritional health;
- Cross-curricular programs, such as Biology classes that provide an opportunity for learning about the link between nutrition and disease, the chemical content of foods, and the specialty requirements of diabetics, hyperactive children, and people with allergies of various kinds. Home Economics classes that teach recipes for various health conditions; and
- Student led projects that contribute to the nutritional health of the student body and the community.

PRINCIPLE #4

Active Healthy School Communities have a culture that values democracy, participation, inclusion, and equity.

Among the ten fundamental principles of the European Network of Health Promoting Schools, democracy is listed first. Their conference report explains: "The Health Promoting School is founded on democratic principles conducive to the promotion of learning, personal and social development, and health."

The next two fundamental principles are *Equity* and *Empowerment and Action Competence*. Equity ensures that schools are free from

oppression, fear and ridicule. "The health promoting school should provide equal access for all to the full range of educational opportunities, enabling each individual to attain his or her full potential free from discrimination." The principle of empowerment and action competence ensures that schools try to improve young people's opportunities to value and act upon their own ideas for positive change. "It provides a setting within which [students], working together with their teachers and others, can gain a sense of achievement. Young people's empowerment, linked to their visions and ideas, enables them to influence their lives and living conditions now and in the future. This is achieved through quality educational policies and practices, which provide opportunities for participation in critical decision making."

PRINCIPLE #5

Active Healthy School Communities have a sense of 'shared responsibility' for children and youth.

Leadership in promoting and supporting collaboration may come from within the school itself or from the larger school community of stakeholders and partners that includes public health, community recreation, and community service providers. An Active Healthy School Community team is an ideal way to engage planning and ensure coordination among stakeholders. Keep in mind, however, that the team is not complete without inclusion of students themselves. Every effort must be made to consider their needs and ideas, include them in decision-making, work in their long-term interest, and empower their leadership. As stated (by a youth participant) in a research study on youth empowerment conducted by the Coalition of Ontario Agencies for School Health - "Nothing About Us, Without Us!"



PRINCIPLE #6

Active Healthy School Communities have a school culture that supports professional development and provides a healthy work setting.

An Active Healthy School Community understands that while the school is an institution for learning, it is also a workplace for approximately one fifth of the Canadian population. In order for the school environment to be a healthy setting for children to learn, it also needs to be a healthy setting for educators to work. Health promoting schools are mindful of the health of students, as well as the health of educators and school staff.

PRINCIPLE #7

Active Healthy School Communities have a school culture that values evidence-based decision-making and evaluation.

An Active Healthy School Community thrives in a culture where there is a continuous quest for information and insights to guide its development. When possible, decisions must be made based on measurable data, research, and feedback that enable an understanding of how to improve services and become cost-efficient and effective. As work processes are examined, all of the assumptions upon which people base their thinking must be questioned in light of all the relevant data and information. Evaluation and monitoring must be ongoing initiatives.

PRINCIPLE #8

Active Healthy School Communities have a school culture that supports and encourages ongoing, lifelong learning and adaptation based on a holistic "systems approach"

The term "lifelong learning" is increasingly significant today. This notion applies not only to student learning, but also to the school community at large. Schools as institutions can and should continually learn and adapt to changing needs and responsibilities. Communities and organizations that interact with schools must also adapt in order to maintain effective school relationships and partnerships as schools change to meet emerging demands.

According to Stanton (in press), the term capacities can be viewed as "the combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes required to accomplish or attain a certain process/outcome". Stanton identified

eleven core elements or capacities that need to be considered to successfully initiate, implement and sustain a holistic integrated approach to health-promoting schools:

- An appreciation and understanding of an integrated holistic approach to health
- An appreciation and understanding of system change and integrated planning processes
- Development of a common and shared vision/meaning
- A focus on people and relationship building
- Design/creation of an organizational infrastructure
- Design/implementation of a multi-strategic approach
- Brokering/leveraging resources
- Identification, design and delivery of professional development, education and training
- Accountability and governance structures
- Evaluation and monitoring mechanisms
- An environment that supports and encourages ongoing learning and sustainability