



Guiding Principles for Healthy Schools: A Comprehensive School Health Approach

Northern Health wants to increase health and wellness and improve quality of life for all Northerners. One way this may be achieved is by promoting healthy schools and working with schools/school districts, students/families and the community to:

- Support coordinated efforts when working in a school setting.
- Support an incremental approach to build on existing internal/external efforts.
- Recognize that planning, implementing, and messaging health promotion for children and youth in a school setting is best achieved if done in partnership fostering a shared responsibility between health, education, communities and families.
- Support a comprehensive school health approach when working with schools/school districts/regions.
- Encourage collaboration with the education sector at various levels to develop a common understanding and a common vision for integrating health promotion in the school setting.
- Focus on health promotion for children and youth while being consistent with Northern Health positions, where appropriate.

For further information, please refer to the complete *Guiding Document on Healthy Schools* available on the Northern Health web site: www.northernhealth.ca (About Us/Position Statements/Addressing Risk Factors), or by using the following address: <http://www.northernhealth.ca/AboutUs/PositionStatementsAddressingRiskFactors.aspx>

What is a Healthy School?

A healthy school provides children and youth with opportunities to learn and develop healthy habits that support their current and future well-being. It is widely recognized that school settings are prime locations for students to learn about good health behaviours and practice making positive choices to support healthy lifestyles and relationships. The healthy school concept is not a “one size fits all” model limited to physical education and health classes; the intent is to encourage the development of a health conscious population in a school community within the greater community.

Health Concerns Among School-Aged Children and Youth

Evidence indicates that health habits acquired at an early age may lead to lifelong behaviours that can positively or negatively impact overall health status as children age. As health behaviours are developed in part in childhood, there is a window of opportunity to foster behaviours which promote health. The following is a list of *some* of the risk factors that children and youth populations are faced with:

- Sedentary behaviour / physical inactivity
- Unhealthy eating
- Overweight and obesity
- Substance use
- Injuries
- Violence and abuse
- Bullying
- Mental health concerns

A variety of factors affect the healthy development of children and youth. Schools that provide supportive physical and social environments, as well as high-quality health and physical education, have been shown to have positive effects on fostering healthy lifestyle habits. Where comprehensive school health approaches are sustained, health concerns leading to chronic diseases are lowered, quality of life may be improved and future health care costs avoided.

What is a Comprehensive School Health Approach?

Comprehensive school health is an internationally recognized framework for supporting improvements in students' educational outcomes while addressing school health in a planned, integrated and holistic way. Comprehensive school health:

- Recognizes that healthy young people learn better and achieve more.
- Understands that schools can directly influence students' health and behaviours.
- Encourages healthy lifestyle choices and promotes students' health and well-being.
- Incorporates health into all aspects of school and learning.
- Links health and education issues and systems.
- Needs the participation and support of families and the community at large.

Comprehensive school health encompasses the whole school environment with specific actions in four distinct (but inter-related) pillars with a student-centred focus. The pillars include: the social and physical environment; teaching and learning; healthy school policy; and partnerships and services.



Adapted from the Joint Consortium for School Health (2012).

Integrating Health and Education: A Settings-based Approach

Evidence supports that a coordinated and integrated approach is more effective than single actions. To achieve greatest success, comprehensive school health depends on a common vision, shared responsibilities and harmonized actions among health, education and other sectors. The challenge is to coordinate these efforts so that partners pool resources and develop action plans together with (and in support of) schools.

Why Develop Guiding Principles?

Much work towards this approach has already been achieved within Northern Health (e.g., School Health Planning Team, consultation with the provincial Healthy Families BC's Schools Performance Framework and regional asset mapping). The goal of stating these guiding principles is to develop a common understanding of the idealized approach and to build on existing efforts to continually work within this framework and towards these goals.

