



Strategies to Increase Connectedness: Elementary School Toolkit

The purpose of this resource is to provide educators with strategies to increase connectedness and student sense of belonging to their school. Strategies target multiple levels of influence including attitudes and knowledge as well as the social and physical environments.

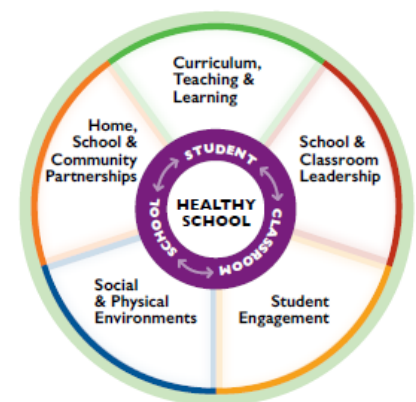
Highlights of the Toolkit:

- Curriculum related activities that can be used in the classroom and school to enhance student sense of belonging and connectedness.
- Activities to support school and classroom leadership and student engagement.
- School level initiatives to create supportive environments.
- Announcements and health walls.

How was this resource developed?

This toolkit was designed to support *The Foundations for a Healthy School* resource, which recommends that health promotion activities in schools' target each of the components of the framework which include:

- Curriculum, teaching and learning
- School and classroom leadership
- Student engagement
- Social and physical environment
- Home, school and community partnerships



For more information about the Foundations for a Healthy School visit <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/healthyschools/foundations.html>

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The evidence clearly demonstrates that for an initiative in the school setting to be impactful, it has to be multicomponent and delivered over an extended period of time versus single component or "one off" programming. Therefore, to effectively address connectedness, the best action plan is to implement various activities from each component of the Foundations for a Healthy School Framework.

Why focus on school connectedness?

In Canada, approximately 14 to 25% of children and youth experience mental health concerns (Waddell, Shepherd, Chen & Boyle, 2013). According to the 2015 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, an estimated 16.5% of students in grades 7 to 12 reported fair or poor mental health, a significant increase from 11.4 % in 2007 and a non-significant increase from 15% in 2013 (Boak, Hamilton, Adlaf, Henderson, & Mann, 2016). Further, females were more likely to report fair or poor mental health compared to males (23.2 % compared to 10.3% respectively). The likelihood of reporting poor mental health was found to increase significantly with grade, ranging from 7.7% among grade 7 students to approximately 18.9% in grade 12 (Boak et al., 2016).

Mental health concerns during childhood and adolescence are associated with poor academic achievement, substance misuse, an increased risk for poverty, and other adverse outcomes throughout the lifespan (Barry, Clarke, Jenkins & Patel, 2013). According to the 2002 Mental Health and Well-being Canadian Community Health Survey, almost 70% of young adults aged 15–24 years with mood or anxiety disorders reported that their symptoms had started before the age of 15 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). During childhood and adolescence, there is an opportunity to lay the foundation for positive mental health and to reduce the risks for mental health concerns later in life (Barry et al., 2013; Weare & Nind, 2011).

Literature has indicated that enhancing protective factors and reducing risk factors can help children and adolescents avoid multiple behaviors that place them at risk for adverse health and educational outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Protective factors are defined as “individual or environmental characteristics, conditions or behaviours that reduce the effects of stressful life events to promote social and emotional skills and reduce risks” (Centers for Disease and Control Prevention, 2017). Some protective factors include positive school climate, a sense of belonging, and recognition of achievement (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, University of Toronto and Toronto Public Health, 2014). Additionally, there is an association between school connectedness and improved emotional health, increased academic achievement, and reduced risk-taking behaviours (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan & Shochet, 2013).

The Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium of School Health defines school connectedness as “the extent to which students perceive that they are accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the educational environment” (Morrison & Peterson, 2013). According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, “school connectedness is the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health conducted in the United States, found that students’ sense of school connectedness was one of the strongest protective factors of youth high-risk behaviors, such as substance use, violence, and suicidality (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris, Jones, Tabor, Beuhring, Sieving, Shew, Ireland, Bearinger, and Udry, 1997 and, McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). School connectedness has also been shown to be a protective factor for adolescent sexual and reproductive health (Markham, Lormand, Gloppen, Peskin, Flores, Low, & House, 2010). Since school connectedness has been shown in the research literature to be a predictor for mental health (Kidger, Araya, Donovan & Gunnell, 2012), enhancing the implementation of activities to increase school connectedness and sense of belonging can be part of an overall strategy at schools to improve the positive mental health for children and youth.

Why schools should play a role?

Schools have been identified as an ideal setting to work with children and youth because of the universal enrollment of children in school and the consistent access to this target population. However, a more compelling reason aligns with *Ontario's Well-being Strategy for Education*. It is undisputed that healthy students are better prepared to learn. Studies demonstrate that promoting student health and well-being can help schools meet their educational goals, such as reduced absenteeism, fewer behavioural problems, and higher school-wide test scores and grades (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

A healthy school not only provides educational opportunities but creates a supportive environment for health and well-being. The *Foundations for a Healthy School* is an Ontario Ministry of Education resource that emphasizes the importance of taking a comprehensive approach to address health-related topics that contribute to well-being. This approach demonstrates that multiple levels of influence determine individual behaviour and recognize that no single factor can adequately account for why children and youth engage in health risk or health promotion behaviours.

Why is student engagement important?

Students are arguably the most important stakeholders in the education system and thus student engagement should be at the heart of a healthy school. The *Foundations for a Healthy School* defines student engagement as “*the extent to which students identify with and value their learning; feel a sense of belonging at school; and are informed about, engaged with and empowered to participate in and lead academic and non-academic activities*”. While student engagement is one of the five components of a healthy school, student engagement is best achieved when it is integrated into all of the Foundation's components. When students are given the opportunity to be active contributors to their learning and their learning environments, they derive a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community, and gain feelings of competence and satisfaction. The role of the adult is to empower students; give them the skills and confidence to contribute equally to decisions, lead meetings, organize and implement activities. See Student Engagement Activities for ways to increase school connectedness in your school.

What is Public Health's Commitment to Schools?

The goal of Middlesex-London Health Unit's (MLHU) Child and Youth Program Team is to improve the health of children and youth, and contribute to a positive, healthy school climate. Specifically, our team works with school boards and/or staff of elementary and secondary schools, using a comprehensive health promotion approach, to influence the development and implementation of healthy policies, and the creation or enhancement of supportive environments to address key topics. Each school in London and Middlesex County is assigned a Public Health Nurse (PHN). For a list of PHNs assigned to schools, visit <https://www.healthunit.com/public-health-at-your-school>. Contact your PHN to determine how they can support this resource and collaborate with your school to improve the health of children and youth.

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