

Making the Connection

Profiling partnerships between health and education

Engaging in a comprehensive school health (CSH) approach is an excellent opportunity to form valuable connections between school staff and health promoters. Whether you're just learning about what it is or are already engaging in a CSH approach, there are always opportunities to form partnerships that can support you in that journey. Here, we take a look at some examples of those partnerships in action with interviews with three members of the healthy schools community:

Tricia Labrie – Healthy Schools Coordinator

Tanya Derksen – Public Health Nurse

Toresa Crawford – Teacher, Nala'atsi School

Tricia Labrie – Healthy Schools Coordinator

"It was our partnership with Interior Health through [a] grant that had us look more closely at how we align with Public Health Nurses," recalls Tricia Labrie of how this important connection was initially formed. "When the 'Got Health?' team was first developed, PHNs were invited to take part in the process of planning health initiatives such as a school garden," recalls Tricia. She describes how they were hoping for at least one PHN to be involved and instead they got four! "They were very enthusiastic to take part, and were very involved throughout the process," she says. PHNs were also invited to join school staff for CSH team training days to learn along with other health and education staff about what CSH is and how it works. Reflecting on how partnerships between the schools and PHNs can form, Tricia explained how one particular school had developed an inquiry into how students could quit smoking and become more connected to the school. "The Public Health Nurses were really helpful in gathering resources and identifying sources of funding for the project, as well as providing ongoing education about the risks of smoking on health and wellbeing."

Tanya Derksen – Public Health Nurse

As one of the PHNs Tricia connected with, Tanya Derksen can attest to the value of the relationship that has formed between herself as a PHN and schools. She recounts how she was able to connect with Springvalley Middle School through their Choices program, a classroom for at-risk students who can't manage behaviorally in the regular classroom. The Choices teacher invited Tanya to visit the "Bistro", run by the Choices students, as a resource and to see how they worked together to create healthier food options to serve their peers. She was then invited to join their Got Health? Team. "We attended a half-day Got Health? Development Workshop with other school teams and formulated a team question for our project, 'How will students helping to create a fun, healthy eating and free time environment improve the school experience?'" Tanya explains. Using a CSH approach, the project quickly flourished from changing the menu available at lunch, to developing gardens where kids learned to grow their own food, developing composts, recycling, water harvesting and creating more healthy outdoor school spaces. What started as the Got Health? Team expanded to a Healthy School Club and has since evolved into "Greening the Ghetto". Tanya connected with the students to develop surveys, collate results, and create graphs for their

final Got Health? presentation. As time went on, she was invited to check in on the progress of the garden while on her routine school visits. “I dropped by to check in on the school one day, and ended up digging holes in the garden with the kids...in my work clothes! It was fantastic. I loved it,” she recalls. She saw kids starting to take more pride in their school environment and making healthy choices.

For those interested in engaging in the CSH approach, Tanya shared some great advice based on her own experiences. “Teachers aren’t always aware that [PHNs] can help, and [PHNs] aren’t always aware of all that we can do outside of our regular job duties. When you engage with schools in this way, you have a much broader impact than you might think.”

Toresa Crawford – Teacher, Nala’atsi School

If you ask Toresa Crawford what it takes to form strong and supportive partnerships, she’ll tell you that taking the time to build meaningful relationships is the key ingredient. Her extensive teaching experience has given her many opportunities over the years to engage with health professionals such as Erin, a community nutritionist. When they first crossed paths, Toresa’s school was based out of the Friendship Centre where Erin had a short-term contract. Toresa approached Erin to see if she would be interested in providing nutritional counselling to the students at the Nala’atsi School. That initial introduction started what has turned out to be a mutually supportive and lasting relationship. A valued resource, Erin has supported the school’s healthy eating program by bringing in food that is both nutritious and economical while teaching both students and staff how easy it is to prepare healthy meals. “I knew she would be the perfect fit for our program because not only was she a nutrition expert, but she could connect with teenagers which was **really** important.”

“An integral part of our program is the students’ relationships with Aboriginal Elders and community members,” Toresa explains. “These valuable people act as mentors and positive role models while promoting traditional knowledge and values.” As time went on, Toresa noticed that, not only were students choosing healthy alternates to pop and junk food but they were also more connected to the Elders, community members, Aboriginal culture, other students and the school.

If you’re wondering how you can engage with your own community partners, Toresa suggests that having patience pays off. “You have to be persistent. It takes time to build relationships and trust. Make the people you want to be connected with your program feel welcome! Start small; invite people from the community to drop in for tea, lunch and/or join in the art or cultural activities. If you want it to work, you have to commit yourself to the time it will take to build those important relationships. In the end forming those connections will pay off with supportive community resource people who will not only enrich your organization, but the people within it.”

The Bigger Picture

Forming partnerships is a great way for health, education, and other community sectors to work together to create healthy school environments that will foster better learning outcomes. There are many reasons to get involved in this process and the opportunities that come from engaging with schools and health

authorities often reach far beyond their intended purpose. Here are just a few thoughts on the CSH approach, and what unexpected results may come from it.

“The CSH process gives everyone a reason to align. We are working together for the students. They are the reason we are doing this.” – Tricia Labrie

“You never know what kind of future opportunities may come from being involved in a healthy schools project. From my perspective, it’s about being visible, starting those conversations that will lead to bigger things. Ask some inquiring questions, see where they lead you! It’s all about looking at different opportunities to connect with the schools. I mean, look at me for example. I went for immunizations and ended up being there for the garden and the kids.” – Tanya Derksen

“No matter who it is [that you want to engage with], form the relationship. Take the time and great things will happen.” – Toresa Crawford

“We are building trust not only with the kids. We are building trust with the school staff as well.” – Tanya Derksen