Comprehensive School Health

Integrated approach

Comprehensive school health is an integrated approach that gives students opportunities to observe and learn positive health attitudes and behaviours. It includes a broad spectrum of programs, activities and services that take place in homes, schools and communities in order to help children and youth enhance their health, develop to their fullest potential, and build productive and satisfying relationships. The programs, activities and services developed within comprehensive approaches involve young people, families, schools, agencies and organizations concerned with children and youth.

Components of a comprehensive school health approach include:

- health and physical education instruction that promotes commitment to healthy choices and behaviours
- health and community services that focus on health promotion, and provision of appropriate services to students and families who need assistance and intervention
- environments that promote and support behaviours that enhance the health of students, families and school personnel.
Determinants of health

Strong support networks, services, physical environments and instruction are all important determinants of health. Each of these factors can be positively influenced through a comprehensive school health approach.

Support networks
To make healthy lifestyle decisions, children and youth depend on support from the people around them. Families, peers, school staff and community members can influence and reinforce health. The comprehensive school health approach strengthens support networks and encourages active involvement of key people in the learning process. Support includes:
- parental involvement
- mentors
- peer support
- community participation and development
- family wellness programs
- staff wellness programs.

Services
Many organizations are responsible for delivering health services, including regional health authorities, Children’s Services and the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC). The support services essential for a comprehensive school health approach include:
- early identification and intervention
- child protection services
- counselling
- services for students with special needs
- treatment, rehabilitation and post-treatment support.

Physical environments
Clean, safe environments promote health and help prevent injuries and disease. To be most effective, a comprehensive school health approach needs healthy physical environments within schools and communities, which includes:
- effective safety procedures and regulations
- environmental standards, such as adequate lighting and safe noise levels
- adequate sanitation and hygiene standards
- measures for promoting safety and preventing injuries
- support for good nutrition
- smoke-free school policies.
Instruction
Effective health education:
• is linked to health services
• is supported by health policies, programs and activities in schools and communities
• takes place in a healthy and safe physical environment.

The comprehensive school health approach recognizes that schools are part of their larger communities and that learning happens in and beyond the school environment. It acknowledges that much of what is learned is affected by influences outside classrooms, and that the likelihood of students adopting and maintaining healthy behaviours increases when messages from multiple sources are consistent.

The essential feature of the comprehensive school health approach is the connections among these components—support networks, services, physical environments and instruction. The comprehensive school health approach involves people working together so that all young people can make positive choices to enhance their own health and the health of the communities in which they live.

Program benefits
Studies of school-based programs indicate that health and life skills instruction is effective in changing health behaviours and attitudes. The integration of instruction with social supports, community services and healthy physical environments brings about even better results.

The comprehensive school health approach encourages long-range planning, and provides a framework for schools, parents and communities to focus on what is most important at any specific time. The overall purpose of the comprehensive approach is to provide a good education, improve health and foster healthy attitudes and behaviours.

Benefits for learners
Studies on the relationship between health and performance in school indicate that positive school climates can improve learning and teaching. Physical activity can also improve brain functioning and increase academic success. Research also indicates that students who experience success at school, and believe they have options for the future, understand the value of good health.

Benefits for families
The comprehensive school health approach helps young people and their families understand how they can have control over many conditions that affect their health. Parents can also present a family perspective on sensitive topics, and help their children apply and integrate the new health information and skills they are learning. Overall, a comprehensive school health approach results in improved health behaviours for the whole family.
Benefits for schools
Schools that adopt a comprehensive school health approach experience tangible benefits, such as improved student achievement, lower absenteeism, reduced drop-out rates, less student alienation and lower incidences of smoking and alcohol use.

When students practise and commit to expressing feelings appropriately, communicating persuasively, resolving conflicts nonviolently and managing stress effectively, they help create healthier school climates.

This approach also helps staff coordinate efforts and tailor programs to meet specific goals and needs. A comprehensive school health approach assists in establishing priorities and maximizing use of instructional and administrative time.

Benefits for teachers
Teachers also benefit from environments and programs that support good health. Staff wellness programs can improve teacher performance and reduce stress. Staff who participate in school site health promotion activities, such as physical fitness, balanced nutrition or smoking cessation, are more likely to reinforce positive health messages through their daily interactions with students.

Benefits for service agencies
For health and children’s services professionals, this approach provides collaborative advantages that support the efficient delivery of services. This approach offers mental health and regional health authority staff opportunities to promote the services they provide, which increases the likelihood that students receive the health services they need.

For government officials, comprehensive school health provides a framework for planning and policy development that enables them to consider both the big picture, and local needs and concerns.

Partnership benefits
For families, volunteers and community groups, this approach fosters partnerships through programs and activities. The comprehensive school health approach is a framework that encourages schools, parents and communities to strive to achieve shared goals. Communities expect schools and families to prepare students to become healthy, productive citizens. Communities, in turn, have a responsibility to join with schools and families to support efforts to achieve this goal. School and community partnerships take many forms—from individuals working together to a collective of community groups forming partnerships with entire school divisions.
Cost benefits
The comprehensive school health approach is cost effective. With even modest overall success rates, reducing illness-related downtime saves dollars. Building attitudes and behaviours for improved long-term health is a worthwhile investment.

Implementing comprehensive school health

Comprehensive school health is a process that starts from the specific school’s current situation, and evolves from that school’s unique concerns and priorities. As a result, a comprehensive health approach looks different in each school. The needs, issues and concerns of students and their families vary from school to school depending on the ages of the student population, geographic location, and social climate of the school and community.

One strategy for implementing a comprehensive school health approach includes the following steps.

1. Establish a school-based leadership team by identifying key players, such as administrators, health educators, physical educators, school counsellors, local health unit staff, parents and supporting health partners from community agencies.

2. Develop a common mission and language. Define what a healthy school is and identify what healthy school practices would look like.

3. Ensure school staff understand and support the comprehensive school health approach.

4. Conduct a needs assessment survey to identify student, family and staff needs.

5. Map existing school-based and community resources, and identify duplications and gaps in service.

6. Use the resource map and needs assessment data to prioritize program needs and make decisions about how to strengthen or modify existing efforts.

7. Analyze potential barriers to implementing this approach and develop strategies to overcome these challenges.

8. Develop an action plan that includes:
   - professional development opportunities
   - a funding structure that identifies existing and potential resources
   - communication activities that expand and maintain community awareness
   - evaluation.


