

# School-Community Partnerships Themes Ever Active Schools



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April, 2015

## INTRODUCTION

Ever Active Schools (EAS) provides provincial leadership that promotes and supports healthy, active school communities. EAS accomplishes this mandate by providing learning opportunities, communication and knowledge exchange, developing resources and being a catalyst for collaboration and partnerships supporting the healthy school community.

Approach to the project: EAS engaged an external consultant (Jill Osler) to complete a review of the key factors of school-community partnerships, to help determine how schools can be better supported to form strong, sustainable partnerships with community. Through this review, a series of presentations and documents were examined to gather this information.

The following items were examined for the review:

1. Four “Pecha Kucha” presentations from the Shaping the Future conference
2. A webinar titled “Partnering with Schools: A discussion between after-school programs and their school sites”
3. School-Community Partnerships interview results report (done by the Alberta Centre for Active Living for EAS)
4. The EAS Partnership Survey Results report

## SELECTED KEY FINDINGS

### **Theme 1: Take time to build strong relationships**

- Network with as many potential partners as possible, taking that time can uncover opportunities you were not aware of.
- Take time to meet in person and to listen to one another.
- Be patient and put in effort in order for the relationship to grow over time, it won't always happen overnight.
- Be mutually supportive and flexible with one another.

### **Theme 2: Partnership make-up**

- Take some time to reflect and think about who needs to be in the partnership.
- All partners will have their own expertise and bring something to the table.
- When possible and relevant, include a variety of multidisciplinary organizations in the partnership to give an enriched perspective.
- Remember that everyone has wisdom.

### **Theme 3: Conduct a needs assessment**

- A needs assessment is a good place to start for laying the groundwork to decide upon the purpose of the partnership.
- The results are used for a variety of purposes including uncovering barriers, gaps and school/community needs.
- The assessment should identify the program population to be targeted.
- Take a holistic approach and attempt to gather multiple voices; those of students, teachers, parents, community members and other stakeholders.

### **Theme 4: Program purpose-what need is it addressing?**

- Develop community-specific unique programs that benefit all partners based on the results of the needs assessment.
- Programs should be developed with the target population's needs at the forefront and developed in conjunction with them.
- Think outside the box: what programs would best address the identified gaps? Don't just do what you've always done.

### **Theme 5: Develop and focus on a shared vision and goals**

- From the start agree upon what goals you are hoping to achieve and what success looks like. What do you want to achieve and by when?
- Create a partnership agreement that outlines each partner's roles and responsibilities to ensure accountability.
- Have an initial visioning process and make sure all the right people are there and work on creating a shared vision.
- Take a team approach where everyone agrees on the desired end result, and success as a group is more important than individual needs. It is no one partner's mandate and yet every partner's mandate. There should be a sense of shared responsibility.
- Be realistic, need generally exceeds capacity and resources available, think to yourself: "What can we do well?"

### **Theme 6: Resources needed**

- When possible, a program coordinator (or multiple coordinators) that represents all parties of the partnership help to keep all pieces together and organized.
- Develop a program budget at the start, keeping costs as low as possible.
- Determine who is paying for what and who is handling any partnership money. Be transparent about fund allocation.
- If required, apply for and ensure funding is in place before you start.
- Take time to think: "Who and what are our internal and external resources?"
- Schools can be used as a community hub when it is appropriate and needed, as they can be a great place for everyone to come together, and increase access for the children and youth attending the programs.

### **Theme 7: Communication**

- Start the partnership planning with an honest discussion about realistic ways to partner and how to avoid barriers you have experienced in the past.
- Create a communications plan as part of the program planning; if a school communications plan exists you can use that as a model.
- Continue throughout the partnership with regular, clear, ongoing communication with all partners. Be honest, talk about what's working and what's not, and how to move forward.

### **Theme 8: Data**

- Research, evaluation and knowledge translation should all be considered from the start of the partnership. Build a plan as to how these will be integrated into the program.
- Build knowledge translation into the program and communications plans; where it is decided how results will be disseminated back to the community to enhance buy-in. Tailor the messaging you use to each stakeholder group.
- Process evaluation is a useful tool as it is a way of monitoring the program as you go, and provides the information needed to make adjustments to strategy implementation in order to strengthen effectiveness.
- Consider how you want to measure success. What methods will you use to assess your program?
- Determine what you want to evaluate; the partnership, the outcomes, the process or all?
- The best results will be achieved in a school-community partnership when evidence-based programs are implemented.

### **Theme 9: Community and Volunteer Involvement**

- Involve people outside the partnership, as including families and other community volunteers will help to make the program more sustainable.
- Local businesses can be very valuable connections to be made. They can provide volunteers, space, resources, or become part of the partnership. Take time to think who in the community could be an asset to your partnership and program.

### **Theme 10: School and Administrative Support**

- Schools need to foster a culture that is open to community partnerships, where the door is held wide open for organizations to come in and have a conversation.
- The openness needs to be facilitated by the principal who should be a champion for pursuing this type of work in order to embed it in to practice.

## CONCLUDING STATEMENT

There are many factors that contribute to the success of school-community partnerships. How the partnership is started is pivotal to the progress that can be made. There is a need to take time at the start to build relationships, plan the program and evaluation, and to make sure communication is positive and ongoing. The potential impact of a successful partnership between schools and communities is immense, with improved health, social connectedness, academic performance, and more, being possible outcomes of a very strong program.