

SCHOOL- COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

From the People for Education Annual Report
on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools 2011



SCHOOL-COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The healthy development, learning and life success of children depend upon the joint efforts of parents, families, community members and agencies, educators, health providers, social and justice workers, Elders and many others. Saskatchewan School^{PLUS}

Schools can't do it alone. That message is clear from decades of research.¹

When schools have strong connections to a range of community organizations and supports, families are more likely to use them, and students are more likely to be successful.²

"Connected" schools are either home to or have strong links with things like child care, employment support, health centres, community kitchens, adult education, parent groups, community gardens, youth groups, social services, cultural centres, parenting classes, nutritional classes, public libraries and recreation programs.³

Many provinces have expansive policies and funding to support schools as centres of their communities. In this, Ontario lags behind.⁴

SCHOOLS AT THE CENTRE

Over the last two years, People for Education conducted a series of public dialogues about the future of Ontario's education policy. These dialogues led to a new vision for education: "Schools at the Centre," where schools are a vital part of the ecosystem of influences on Ontario's children, families, communities. Strong, two-way connections between the school and the community are a key element of this vision.

WHERE DO SCHOOLS CONNECT?

For the first time, People for Education asked schools whether there was "often," "some" or "never" cooperation or coordination with a selection of community organizations (the list of organizations will be expanded next year).

While almost all schools report they have some connection with Public Health Units (98% of elementary schools and 99% of high schools), schools' connections to many other organizations are sporadic.

QUICK FACTS FOR 2010/11

- 20% of elementary schools and 34% of secondary schools have staff time allocated for maintaining school-community connections.
- Only 6% of elementary schools and 9% of secondary schools have a full-time school-community liaison.

Elementary schools most frequently report that they have "some" connection with seven or eight community organizations, including child care, municipal recreation programs, and public libraries.

- 47% report they "often" cooperate with child care, while 25% report they "never" do.
- 22% report they "often" cooperate with municipal recreation programs, while 19% report they "never" do.
- 16% "often" connect with the public library, while 25% "never" do.
- 5% "often" connect with Aboriginal organizations, while 60% "never" do.

High schools are more likely than elementary schools to report that they "often" connect with community agencies.

- 31% report they "often" cooperate with youth employment agencies, while 5% "never" do.
- 30% report they "often" cooperate with adult education programs, while 26% "never" do.
- 22% "often" connect with Aboriginal organizations, while 35% "never" do.
- 25% report they "often" cooperate with municipal recreation programs, while 6% "never" do.
- 12% "often" connect with the public library, while 31% "never" do.

HIGHLY “CONNECTED” SCHOOLS

A small number of schools report they have connections with all the community organizations listed on the survey, and principals from these schools described a number of benefits. A principal from Waterloo Region DSB said that the school’s strong connections to its community “provides more opportunities for student learning, more community partners who support school activities, and a safer, more caring school and neighbourhood. There is a significant impact on school climate and culture, and the strong connection with the community helps to ‘market’ the school and promote public education. In addition, the students gain supports from various programs in terms of resources and expertise.”

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS NEED HUMAN RESOURCES

It takes many hours of consistent work and outreach to maintain a network of community connections. Schools that have specific staff members who are dedicated to this work are much more likely to report high numbers of connections with ethnocultural programs, settlement programs, faith-based organizations, seniors’ organizations and youth employment organizations. But only 34% of secondary and 20% of elementary schools report they have a staff member (other than the principal or vice-principal) who is responsible for acting as a liaison with the school community. And in those schools, less than a quarter report they allot any actual staff time for this position.

POLICY FRAMEWORK

While there are many examples of successful school-community partnerships across Ontario, the provincial policy framework is patchy. The province provides some support for the community use of schools and funding for one position per board to coordinate that community use. However, there is still no integrated framework of education, health, health promotion, children and youth services and recreation services that would effectively address the needs of Ontario’s children and youth. This is despite decades of talk about dismantling these service “silos.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Families are more likely to use programs offered through school. School-community partnerships promote child well-being, and housing these services and programs in schools is a cost-effective use of these public spaces.

People for Education recommends

- the province develop strong community-school policy and include funded staff time to build and maintain school-community connections, and
- as recommended in 2008 by the Honourable Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling, that the province establish a cabinet-level secretariat to oversee an integrated and funded policy framework that would include measurable outcomes for healthy child development.

WHAT PRINCIPALS TOLD US . . .

Our connections with the community are long-standing and nurtured by continuous communication and project work. We are the only school in town, and I like to say that we are the best school in town. The community loves our school, supports our school and works with us (and we work with them) on many worthwhile projects. Having all of these connections is priceless— we express a need, the word gets out and the network of friends and contacts that we have in the community will usually come forward with possible solutions or supports for our school.

Secondary School, Hastings & Prince Edward DSB

Students require support with mental health issues, and we have more family issues related to social-economic factors that require support from community agencies.

Elementary School, Ottawa CDSB

NOTES

- 1 See, e.g., Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Secretary of the Treasury (U.K.). (2003). *Every child matters*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/CM5860.pdf>; Rothstein, R. (2008). Whose problem is poverty? *Educational Leadership*, 65(7), 8-13; Government of Ontario. (1976). *Open doors: A community school handbook*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer.
- 2 There is strong evidence that strategic work with community organizations is a resource to make schools better academically. See e.g. Bryk, A.S., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., Easton, J.Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, which identifies relationships with community organizations as an "essential support" for improving schools (page 57).
- 3 Province of Nova Scotia. (2010). SchoolsPlus. Retrieved from <http://schoolsplus.ednet.ns.ca/schoolsplus>
- 4 Saskatchewan's School^{plus} is a province-wide initiative led by the Ministry of Education and the provincial education system that promotes learning success and well-being for every child and young person. It envisions a province where every school is actively improving student outcomes through the delivery of a strong learning program and serving as a centre for social, health and other services for children and their families. It includes local-level planning mechanisms for service integration and funding support for items like prevention and early intervention. Saskatchewan Learning. (n.d.) School^{plus} at a glance. Retrieved from <http://www.education.gov.sk.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=589,144,107,81,1,Documents&MediaID=1354&Filename=SchoolPlus-at-a-glance.pdf.shtml>

The Manitoba Community Schools Partnership Initiative calls for the development of community hubs in high-needs communities. Schools which develop joint community school councils can apply to the province for up to \$100,000 to improve the learning program, parent community partnerships, integrated services and community development. Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth. (2006, August). *Community schools: A support*

document for the partners in the community schools partnership initiative. Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/cspi/documents/support_doc.pdf

English schools in Quebec have developed the Community Learning Centres program, which includes technical assistance and financial assistance to help schools become community learning centres. The program funds a local coordinator, who has responsibility for developing partnerships and seeking external funding. Early evaluation suggests positive results for students, schools and communities. See e.g. WestEd. (2010, October). *Evaluation of the Quebec Community Learning Centres: An English language minority initiative*. Retrieved from http://www.learnquebec.ca/export/sites/learn/en/content/clc/documents/CLC_final_report_WestEd_ANG_NC-437_Nov_18_2010_REV_10_03_2011_F_Final_Evaluation_Report_Vol1.pdf

New Brunswick has a goal of establishing 75 community schools by 2012. Community schools receive financial support, and have designated staff who work to build relationships with different community actors, from health services to seniors volunteering to partnerships with local auto shops. See, e.g. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (n.d.). Community schools: Anglophone sector. Retrieved from <http://www.gnb.ca/0000/communityschools.asp>

Nova Scotia has a SchoolPlus policy, which ensures family resource centres, child care and youth health centres will be located within select schools at all school boards. SchoolsPlus programs and services are delivered in a school setting, during and after school. Each hub site acts as a base for services at multiple schools. The sites support information and connection to services through outreach programs and partnerships with service providers. Each hub site has a SchoolsPlus facilitator and a community outreach worker. Department of Education. (2011, April 14). *SchoolsPlus expanded to all school boards*. Retrieved from <http://www.gov.ns.ca/news/details.asp?id=20110414001>



People for Education is a registered charity that works to support public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.

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To read the full 2011 report, go to <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Annual-Report-on-Ontario-Schools-2011.pdf>