

Board of Health Briefing Report

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health
Date: June 8, 2022
Topic: Comprehensive School Health
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RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended

- 1. THAT the Timiskaming Board of Health receive the report 'Comprehensive School Health' for information.**

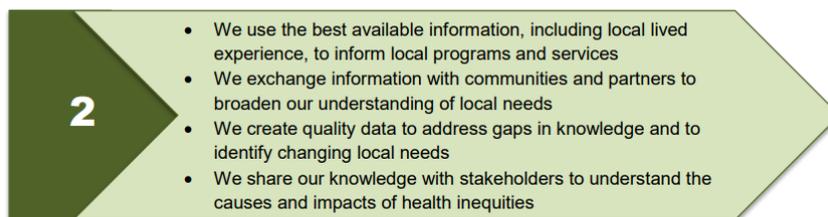
Overview

- The Timiskaming Health Unit area includes 27 schools;
- Schools are an optimal setting to reach most young people, and as a major employer, offer opportunities for health promotion and protection to a large number of people;
- Comprehensive school health is a holistic approach that includes the social and physical environment, teaching and learning, healthy school policy, and partnerships and services;
- THU's approach to school health involves school nurses as main points of contact for each school, and a diverse team of public health professionals providing programs and services;
- THU received funding to support pandemic response as part of the School Focused Nurse Initiative to provide rapid-response support to schools and boards in facilitating public health and preventative and mitigation measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- The pandemic had a significant negative impact on children and youth;
- THU's relationships with partners in education were strengthened within the pandemic response;
- THU staff are working in collaboration with neighbouring health units to support recovery and renewal of comprehensive school health and workplace wellness in 2022-2023.

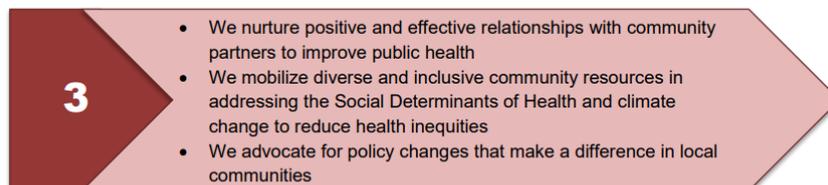
Ontario Public Health Standards (2018) and Timiskaming Health Unit Strategic Plan 2019-2023

This work contributes to meeting requirements and expected outcomes in the Ontario Public Health Standards (2018). Addressing social determinants of health and health inequities aligns with the Policy Framework for Public Health Programs and Services including intersecting with numerous program standards. This work also supports the following THU 2019-2023 strategic directions:

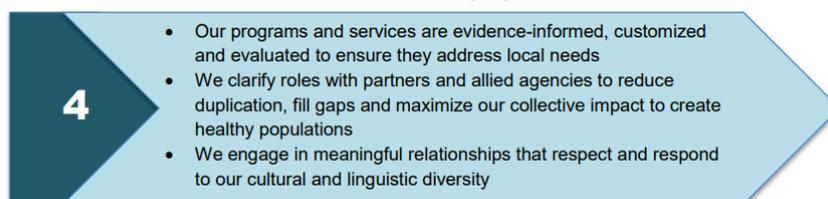
We create, share and exchange knowledge



We collaborate with partners to make a difference in our communities



We adapt to address the diverse and changing local needs



Background

The Ontario Public Health Standards' School Health Standard guides THU's work in schools, with the goal "to achieve optimal health of school-aged children and youth through partnership and collaboration with school boards and schools" (p. 52), achieved with data-driven, equity-focused, collaborative planning and implementation of program and services. Based on local need, topics can include injury prevention, healthy eating, healthy sexuality, immunization, infectious disease prevention, life promotion, mental health promotion, oral health, physical activity, road and off-road safety, substance use and harm reduction, UV exposure, violence and bullying, and visual health.

THU supports comprehensive school health in twenty-two public schools that are part of four school boards (two English and two French) as well as four private parochial schools and one on-reserve Indigenous school, two college campuses, one adult learning centre and the district's childcare centres. This briefing note focuses on THU's work in 27 elementary and secondary schools.

Comprehensive School Health

Comprehensive school health is a holistic approach that includes the social and physical environment, teaching and learning, healthy school policy, and partnerships and services. The Canadian Healthy School Standards describes five "touchstones" of a healthy school:

1. A Healthy School integrates policies with action at all levels
2. A Healthy School taps into and leverages the unique protective factors within the local community and environment before, during and after school

3. A Healthy School is each person within and outside the school bringing knowledge, expertise and resources and sharing responsibility for supporting the health and wellbeing of its children, adolescents and young adults
4. A Healthy School affirms diversity as a gift, engages and empowers this diversity to chart an affirming and appropriate plan, and is able to adapt plans where needed
5. A Healthy School is the central hub from which to support the lifelong health and wellbeing of the child, adolescent and young adult (p.6).

In 2021 there were 4,890 school-aged children and youth (ages 5 to 19 years) in Timiskaming, which was 15.1% of the THU population. In 2019-2020, 90.6% of youth aged 12 to 17 years perceived their health as very good or excellent and 79.8% perceived their mental health as very good or excellent. Schools are a place where we can reach nearly every child and young person, where we can address inequities and almost all of the factors that determine our health: from healthy behaviours to mental health to social skills to literacy of all kinds. As a workplace, schools are an ideal setting to promote health, with important secondary benefit to students.

In 2018 the Ontario Public Health Standards added a new School Health Program Standard. Similar to many other local public health agencies in Ontario, THU already had a school health team in place. THU's school-focused nurses each support a family of schools, building relationships with principals, staff and students. School nurses identify priorities based on school perspectives and local data. They also develop individual areas of expertise and draw on one another's knowledge as they work with their individual schools. They are further complemented by a Registered Dietitian, Community Health Workers/RPNs, a Dental Hygienist and Dental Assistants, Research, Planning and Policy Analysts, and collaborate with Public Health Promoters and Public Health Inspectors and Nurses in other program areas.

School Health and COVID-19

Since early 2020 THU has worked closely with school partners on pandemic guidance while some comprehensive school health work continued in a modified way. In July 2020 the Government of Ontario announced funding for the School-Focused Nurse Initiative in Public Health Units (PHUs) to hire school-focused nurses to provide rapid-response support to schools and boards in facilitating public health and preventative and mitigation measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. THU has received 100% funding for 3 full-time positions until the end of 2022. Local health units report on SFNI activities monthly to the Ministry of Health and the Ontario Association of Public Health Nursing Leaders (OPHNL) is currently conducting an evaluation of the School-Focused Nurses (SFN) Initiative.

During the pandemic, THU participated in regular joint MOH-School Board Director of Education calls with Porcupine Health Unit and joint calls with school bus consortia. Staff supported infection prevention and control in the school setting, with information sessions for school staff, onsite assessments, sharing of curriculum and co-teaching, and by answering questions from school staff. They worked with schools to promote and deliver COVID-19 vaccination to eligible children and youth. They promoted well-being to families using social media, carried out in-school routine immunization in some schools and otherwise offered immunization in-office, in community and through health care providers. They modified the Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program for community implementation and focused active school travel work outside the school yard and with other community stakeholders. Staff also modified the routine school-based immunization program to deliver in community, in-office or safely in

some schools. Oral health and vision screening in schools was completely paused. They also tailored communications to parochial schools to promote safe spaces for learning. THU works closely with neighbouring health units to build consistent policy and practice.

There is urgency to address the health implications of the pandemic among students and school staff. The pandemic has had an overall negative impact on children’s mental health and behaviour, as well as on their levels of physical activity, sedentary behaviour and screen time, increased food insecurity, negative educational outcomes, increased injuries occurring at home, and increased reports of child maltreatment. Adverse experiences during key formative years can have lifelong implications, especially when we factor in disproportionate impacts based on socioeconomic factors. Supporting health in the school setting not only addresses these but improves young people’s ability to learn and staff’s ability to support them in doing so.

Local Work and Next Steps

As the school year comes to an end, planning is now underway for the 2022-2023 academic year. Staff are continuing to collaborate with neighbouring health units and strengthen relationships with public school boards private and First Nation schools as well as:

- Deepening learning about board school structure and processes
- Evolving relationships at various levels within boards and fostering collaboration among health units, health unit programs and with community organizations that support school and childcare health
- Exploring ways to support wellbeing at individual, organizational and community levels
- Using an equity-focused approach in identifying interventions and schools
- Improving access to and use of data for planning and evaluating interventions in schools, both by school partners and THU
- Advocating for healthy public policies that influence the school setting
- Supporting truth and reconciliation in the school setting
- Fostering professional development; THU School staff attended the 2022 Ontario Healthy Schools Conference in London, Ontario, in May.

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