



UPHSCONNECTIONS

March 2010

Supporting Students in Urban Priority Neighbourhoods

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All students deserve the same opportunity to succeed at school. We know this – the challenge is creating the right conditions to enable every student to succeed. This is particularly true for students living in urban neighbourhoods with high rates of poverty, criminal and gang activity, a lack of community resources and student achievement issues.

Established in 2008, the Urban Priority High Schools (UPHS) initiative targets high schools in urban priority areas to reach youth in need. The goal is to help these secondary schools develop the necessary supports and resources to meet the needs of their students and communities. Key results will include creating safe schools, increasing student achievement and building sustainable community partnerships.

To meet the unique needs of their students and communities, 34 schools located in 12 boards across Ontario are using their new resources to offer a creative range of programs from nutrition to student leadership and engagement. These schools are reaching out to students and their families, and working with communities to develop a safe, supportive and positive school environment.

This first edition of *UPHS Connections* highlights examples and best practices from some of the schools involved with the UPHS initiative. We hope schools and communities benefit from hearing about this creative work and that it sparks ideas and innovation across Ontario.

1. Making Community Connections

Nearly 50 per cent of students at Westminster High School in London are new immigrants. For many, English is not their first language. They face language barriers and other risk factors, such as poverty and lack of local services, which may put them at risk of not graduating. Also most are bussed in from a south London neighbourhood.

To overcome these obstacles, Westminster reached out to local community partners such as the South London Neighbourhood Resource Centre (SLNRC), a family, child and youth community enrichment service that develops community-based projects. Westminster hired a settlement worker from SLNRC who divides her time – three quarters at the school, one quarter in the community – and helps students and parents better understand the school system.

Weekly group sessions and individual meetings offer information on volunteer opportunities at school and in the community, course and pathway selection, understanding parent-teacher interviews, exploring options for after high school and self-advocacy strategies. It also

helps connect the students and their families to services and resources in the community.

“Our goal is to create the conditions that will result in improved academic and social performances,” adds settlement worker Rajaa Al-Aubad.

“The partnership builds connections with the students ... reaches out to parents in the community... It is playing a great role in bridging the ethnic and cultural diversity between the school, community, students and parents,” explains Principal Mary Lou Anderson.

To make sure they are on the right track, the school is working with the locally-based Centre for Prevention Science, part of the Child, Youth and Family Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), to develop outcomes and to collect and analyze data. Westminster is confident it has a good program, now it will work with its community partner and develop reporting and evaluation results to prove it.

2. Yum’s the Word: Cooking with Students

“Yum’s the Word” is an innovative nutrition program that teaches Notre Dame High School students in Ottawa how to cook and plan meals. The program is intended for students facing language barriers and those who may be at risk of not graduating. One-third of Notre Dame’s almost 1,000 students are considered to be at-risk.



Yum’s the Word not only gives students valuable cooking and healthy living lessons – along with the chance to eat tasty food like shrimp chow-mein and vegetable stir fries – it also offers a safe place to acquire new skills and develop friendships. Located in a neighbourhood where gang and criminal activity are a reality, having a safe and fun place to meet after school helps to keep students out of harm’s way.

To date, 26 students (13 students each session) have participated in this hands-on experiential program, developing practical cooking skills they can use at home. They have also acquired “insight into catering and associated industries,” says teacher Kristen Smith, the ‘chef’ running the class.

One of the unanticipated benefits is that activities created to improve academic achievement have had a positive impact on the students’ self-esteem.

“This positive sentiment has most definitely influenced the way these students regard school in general, as they have discovered the way they learn best and developed the skills to advocate for themselves,” adds Principal Andre Potvin.

3. Achieving Success at H.B. Beal

H. B. Beal Secondary School in London is working with First Nations students to develop initiatives that will help them achieve success and build awareness within the school community of First Nations cultures. Beal saw a need to focus support to help First Nations students who “struggle with success at school and are overrepresented in failure rates, attendance data and suspension data relative to the size of the population,” explains Principal Don Macpherson.

A priority at Beal includes “improving the academic achievement and credit accumulation rates of our Aboriginal students,” says David Harrison, Beal’s Native Student Success teacher.

First Nations students at Beal are half as likely as non-Aboriginal students to complete the number of credits they need by the end of Grade 9.

In 2008–09, 15 students took part in the Aboriginal Stacked Course, a key component of which includes having a Native Student Success teacher dedicated to providing academic and personal leadership to First Nations students. Since launching the course, Harrison reports that he now works with nine to 11 students daily, helping them obtain credits.

Creating a Healthier High School

Check out these tools to make your school healthy. Better yet, let your students take the lead and come up with ideas to make their school healthier.

- ▶ Discuss healthy schools priorities for your school and communicate them to all school staff and students.
- ▶ Identify community partners that can help implement healthy schools activities.
- ▶ Include healthy schools activities as a part of your school’s improvement plans.



*For more information, tips and tools see the **Healthy Schools** section of the **Ministry of Education** website.*

Grade 9 can be a difficult year for students. To help ease the transition, a special Grade 8 *Transition Conference* was organized by Beal's First Nations students, where their willingness to share personal stories, anxieties and concerns about entering high school helped those from local elementary schools. It also gave the secondary students valuable mentoring experience.

The school also ran a peer mentoring class emphasizing team building and leadership activities. As part of their year-end assignments students created individual 'legacy' projects – whether videos, slide shows or brochures – to help guide future students through life at Beal.

Another new initiative saw First Nations students organize a *Native Awareness Week* in June where First Nations artists, musicians and guest speakers helped provide the school community with a great awareness of the cultural diversity of First Nations communities in the London area.



4. What Students Are Saying

Alternative Education Program

The Alternative Education Program (AEP) at W.F. Herman Secondary School in Windsor is giving another opportunity to those students who are struggling in the regular academic stream. AEP combines independent study and special education techniques with intensive support from a teacher and a child and youth worker. By offering the program onsite, students can attend the alternative program without leaving their friends and community. Failure rates have dropped and credit accumulation has increased.

“This program saved me; I was screwing up, missing school and failing my current classes... I like this class 'cause I can work at my own pace and on which subject I want...it's a stress free environment. I don't have to worry about keeping up with the class... instead of losing all 4 of my credits this semester; I was able to recover 2 credits through this class...”

“(This program) has helped me stay in school and not skip my classes, this course made me want to stay and do my work and get my credit. The motivation the teachers gave me helped a lot and motivated me to behave and not act up. Thanks to them, I'm going to get my two credits.”

“This class has helped me in many ways starting with attendance. If there's a time you're not in class when you're supposed to be, you get an APB (all points bulletin) ... it isn't full of kids to distract me and I have my music to keep me on track and get rid of distractions...”

Boys and Girls Night In

Through the Boy and Girls Night In program at St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary School in Brampton, senior student leaders and community partners provided leadership and welcoming activities for their Grade 9 students. Some 100 girls and 85 boys participated while 25 female and 25 male senior student leaders ran the night event. The experience was clearly positive.

“I met new people and gained experience as a leader. We felt like we achieved something and we set an example for the future students at Aquinas.”

“I benefited from the mentorship program by learning new leadership skills. I also learned new information from the various presentations like internet safety... the school benefited by the Grade nines feeling more comfortable in their first year of high school.”

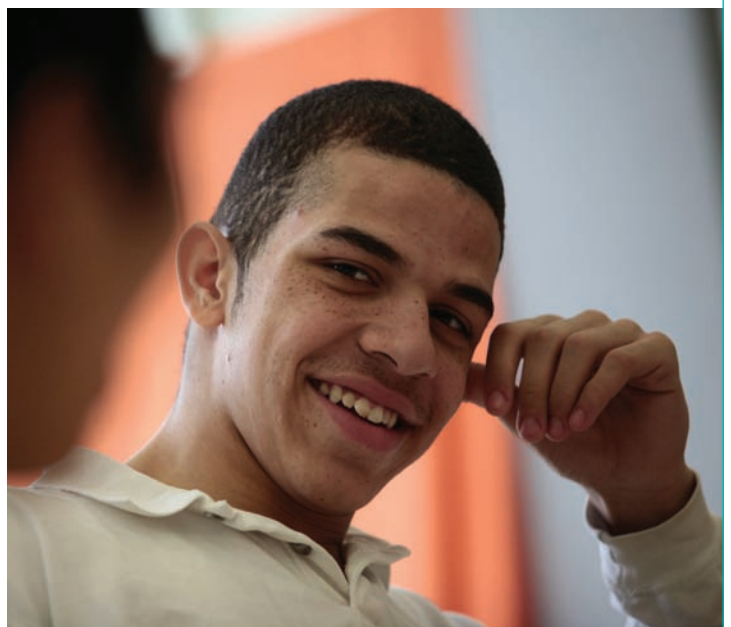
5. Student Leadership Training

C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute in Toronto recognizes that Grade 9 is a critical year in determining whether or not a student will succeed and graduate from high school. Using UPHS funding, the Toronto high school ran a three day leadership training camp for all Grade 9 students. In October 2009, 100 students attended the camp which was run by 50 Jefferys’ senior leadership students. These students are trained to be instructional leaders for the high ropes course, water sports and organized games, as well as facilitators for discussions of equity, empowerment and change.

This initiative is making a “fundamental difference” to C.W. Jefferys, says Principal Audley Salmon. Some of the positive results include friendships between students, and stronger relationships among students and teachers. Jefferys’ students are also applying their new leadership skills by volunteering with local community organizations that run programs for seniors, elementary schools and agencies. This has helped to foster a better culture of community participation in the school, adds Principal Salmon.

Early results indicate some improvement in the marks of a number of the students who attended the leadership camp. They not only connected with staff who attended the camp, but both Grade 9 and senior student leaders continue to benefit from extra mentoring and monitoring by those same staff.

News about the camp’s success has spread to nearby elementary schools where older students are encouraging Grade 8 students to come to C.W. Jefferys and be part of the leadership program.



C.W. Jefferys has been actively working to engage their parents. One successful program is a parent workshop *How to Survive the Teenage Years*, which has become a social space for parents to meet and talk. UPHS funding has allowed the school to do things a little differently this year. They launched a newsletter for parents, letting them know about school events and supports. Then they follow up with a phone call and personal invitation. Attendance has jumped from five to between 15 to 20 parents participating in the program. It is the hands-on approach of Jefferys' staff in reaching out to their community that makes this program successful.

6. Community Engagement: Building on Community Partnerships

A key objective of the UPHS initiative is to build sustainable community partnerships in schools. All schools participating have a school/community steering committee to oversee the development and implementation

of programs and to engage the community. This level of community engagement is new for some schools. However, for others, like Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School (KCI), located in Kitchener, it's nothing new.

"I believe it was this structure and the collective commitment to these values that allowed us to move forward as we did," says Principal Read. As the second year of the program unfolds, schools are encouraged to expand their membership to fully integrate community members, giving them a full and equal place at the table.



Since 2005, KCI has been actively partnering with their community to address a variety of youth-related issues affecting KCI students and youth living in the downtown core. Known as the ONE KCI Community Alliance, this group has actively solved problems and created opportunities for youth and neighbours to develop positive relationships and engage in community development. Partners include volunteers from children's mental health agencies, the youth justice sector, police department, recreation agencies, city or municipal agencies, neighbourhood associations, co-op placement partners and other social groups.

Examples of the extended supports organized through the KCI Community Alliance include:

- ▶ a teen drop-in centre, managed and operated by the City of Kitchener, runs out of KCI on Thursday evenings in the summer
- ▶ a community addiction treatment worker who supports youth with addictions. Working through the Ray of Hope agency, the counsellor currently has a caseload of 15 students for day treatment
- ▶ workshops offered to KCI and feeder school staff and community representatives on restorative justice, conflict resolution and parenting youth with addictions.

To move projects forward, KCI created sub-committees for each project that met regularly and reported to the larger committee. Perhaps one of the most significant contributing factors to the project's success is that "very early on, we established the guiding principles (listed above) that would support our decision making and problem solving," explains Principal Lila Read.



Guiding Principles

1. Build sustainable and financially responsible models, with a long term commitment.
2. Leverage existing expertise in the community to build on partnerships.
3. Measure and evaluate initiatives to determine effectiveness.
4. Extend community response beyond KCI to the downtown core community.
5. Use an integrated approach that promotes cooperation.
6. Involve youth and parents, especially those who are marginalized.
7. Take the opportunity to develop leadership capacity in youth.
8. Understand relationship building as a key component of these programs.
9. Acknowledge other determinants of health and where possible provide support.



Effective Practices in Community Engagement

Listening to the experiences and ideas of people in your local community is critical to finding solutions to meet local needs and aspirations. Research shows that schools can more effectively support students in developing their full potential if they work with community organizations. To get the discussion on community engagement going in your school, take a look at the following sample of effective practices.

Community and Family Engagement: Principals Share What Works.

www.communitys7chools.org/CCSDocuments/CommunityAndFamilyEngagement.pdf

Berg, A. C., Melaville, A. and M. J. Blank
(2006). Washington, DC: Coalition for
Community Schools.

This paper offers a good starting point for discussion by defining community engagement. It explains that community engagement is a two-way street where the school, families, and the community actively work together, creating networks of shared responsibility for student success. It is a tool that promotes civic well-being and strengthens the capacity of schools, families, and communities to support young peoples' development. Community engagement happens when you work with community partners, families, staff, and others toward a shared vision for a school, develop the capacity to drive the vision forward, and share accountability for the results.

The paper also explores ways in which principals across the United States are working successfully with community partners, families and other key stakeholders to improve student outcomes. It provides insights from principals about why to engage communities, the challenges of community engagement, and what strategies and approaches are most effective, including the following six keys to community engagement:

- **Know Where You're Going:** Create a vision of what your school should look like and develop a plan for how to get there.
- **Share Leadership:** Invite community partners who share your school's vision to also share resources, expertise and accountability for targeted objectives.
- **Reach Out:** Learn about the community and become a visible presence in it.
- **Don't Ignore the Elephant in the Room:** Acknowledge and address issues of race and class and define diversity as a strength.
- **Tell Your School's Story:** Know how to make your school's vision come alive. Use stories and data to engage all kinds of community groups in conversations.
- **Stay on Course:** Engage in partnerships that are clearly aligned with your school's vision, goals and objectives. Assess your progress and focus on long-term sustainability.

Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools
www.communityschools.org/CCSFullReport.pdf

Blank, M. J., Melaville, A. and B. P. Shah (2003). Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools.

This paper suggests that bringing school and community assets together will help young people succeed in school and life, and strengthen families. It defines a community school as “both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities.”

The paper proposes the following conditions for learning:

- The school has a core instructional program with qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for students.
- Students are motivated and engaged in learning – in school and in community settings, during and after school.
- The basic physical, mental and emotional health needs of young people and their families are met.
- There is mutual respect and effective collaboration among parents, families and school staff.
- Community engagement, together with school efforts, promotes a safe, supportive and respectful school climate that connects students to the community.

An Institute for Community Engagement: Our Growing Understanding of Community Engagement
www.tamarackcommunity.ca/downloads/home/ce_report.pdf

Tamarack (Waterloo, Ontario)

If you want to learn more about community engagement research, this paper provides a comprehensive literature review of literature on community engagement as well as helpful examples and models of community engagement. It also outlines some criteria for community engagement:

- A broad range of people are participating and are engaged.
- People are trying to solve complex issues.
- The engagement process creates vision, achieves results, creates movement and/or change.
- Different sectors are included in the process.
- There is a focus on collaboration and social inclusion.
- The community determines local priorities.
- There is a balance between community engagement processes and creating action.

Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth and Adults in Charting Assets and Creating Change
http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/files/BuildingCommunity_ToolKit.pdf

Innovation Center for Community and Youth and National 4-H Council (2001). Washington, DC: Innovation Center for Community and Youth/Tides Center.

The Building Community tool kit provides youth and adult facilitators with a framework and tools to create positive community change. It identifies community assets, inspiring action promoting partnerships between and among youth and adults to create lasting and supportive change in the community.

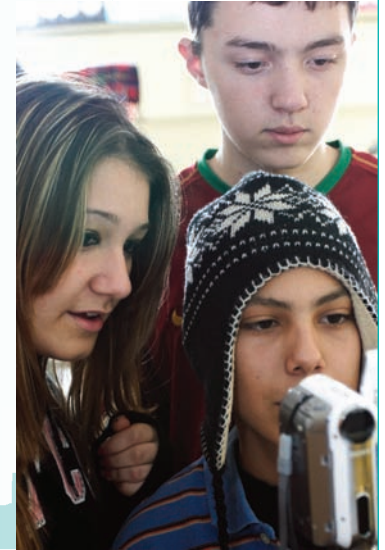
How Accessible is Your School/Community Committee Meeting?

Having accessible meetings where all participants can attend and participate benefits everyone. When arranging accessible meetings, consider physical access to the meeting space as well as access to the meeting proceedings (e.g., agenda, minutes and participation in the discussion). For example:

- ▶ Ensure the meeting location is serviced by accessible or alternate transit services.
- ▶ Hold the meeting in a room located on the building entry floor.
- ▶ When inviting participants ask if they require any special accommodation.
- ▶ Consider the communication needs of your entire audience when preparing the meeting.



For more ideas see
www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/mcsc/english/how/howto_meeting.htm



Tell Us Your Story

How has the UPHS initiative made a difference for your school, students and the community? Let us know. Please submit a story (between 250 – 300 words) to your regional contact (see below) and we'll work with you to showcase it in an upcoming newsletter.

To find out more about the UPHS initiative, please contact:

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Conseil des écoles

catholique du Centre-Est

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Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DSB)

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St. Edmund Campion S.S.
(Brampton)

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Hamilton-Wentworth DSB

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Sir Winston Churchill

Principal, Glenn Cooke

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Toronto Catholic DSB

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More Schools

Toronto DSB

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Waterloo Region DSB

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