

The School-Focused Nurses Initiative

To: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

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Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health receive this report for information.

Key Points

- Beginning in the 2020-2021 school year, funding was provided by the Ministry of Health for a provincial School-Focused Nurses (SFN) Initiative. This funding was intended to support COVID-19 pandemic response activities in schools, child care centres and camps in Ontario.
- COVID-19 pandemic response activities were the focus of the SFN initiative during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years; however, flexibility in the funding agreement has allowed school health promotion work to resume in the 2022-2023 school year.

- Based on key findings from the Well-Being and Health Youth (WHY) Survey, the School Health team is promoting the Healthy Schools certification program through the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (Ophea).
- Twenty (20) schools in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph (WDG) registered for Ophea's Healthy Schools certification program. Of these 20 schools, 13 schools applied for, and were awarded, a \$500 grant from Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health to support their activities.

Background

The School-Focused Nurses Initiative

The School-Focused Nurses (SFN) Initiative was launched by the Ministry of Health in the 2020-2021 school year to provide support related to the COVID-19 pandemic in schools, child care centres and camps across the province. The objectives of the SFN Initiative were to:

1. Provide support in the development and implementation of COVID-19 health and safety plans.
2. Provide sector-specific support for infection prevention, surveillance, screening, and testing, outbreak management, case and contact management and COVID-19 vaccinations.
3. Support communication and engagement with local school communities, as well as the broader health care sector.

While the priority of the initiative was to support COVID-19 response in schools, flexibility was also built into the funding agreement to enable School-Focused Nurses to support the fulfilment of board of health requirements to improve the health of school-aged children and youth as per the School Health Guideline, 2018, of the Ontario Public Health Standards.¹

Evaluation of the School-Focused Nurses Initiative

As part of the ongoing partnership with the Ministry of Health, the Ontario Association of Public Health Nursing Leaders (OPHNL) conducted an evaluation of the provincial SFN Initiative in the spring of 2022. The objectives of the evaluation were to:

1. Assess whether the initiative met its objectives in supporting the pandemic response in schools, child care and camps.
2. Determine whether the initiative benefited the public health COVID-19 response.
3. Explore enablers and barriers to implementation of the initiative and School-Focused Nurse positions.
4. Capture lessons learned to inform planning and implementation of future pandemic/outbreak response in schools and child care settings, as well as ongoing partnerships between public health and education to support school health program delivery.

Data from monthly activity reports completed by each Public Health Unit outlining activities completed by School-Focused Nurses between April 1, 2021 and May 31, 2022 was included in the evaluation. Virtual focus groups were conducted to gather feedback from those involved with the SFN Initiative. A total of 178 individuals participated in a focus group, including 58 individuals involved in a leadership or management role, 88 School-Focused Nurses and 32 school administrators.¹

Overall, findings from the evaluation demonstrated that the SFN Initiative was successful in meeting its objectives related to supporting the COVID-19 pandemic response in schools, child care and camps. Further, results indicated that the SFN Initiative not only benefitted the public health COVID-19 response, but that School-Focused Nurse positions and skill sets can be leveraged for future emergency and outbreak responses, mandatory and comprehensive school health program delivery and initiatives focused on enhancing health equity and reducing health disparities among school-aged children and youth.¹

On September 29, 2022, the Ministry of Health announced an investment of approximately \$31 million in additional funding to extend the provincial SFN Initiative for the remainder of the 2022-2023 school year. This funding extension allows WDG Public Health's 14 temporary, full-time Public Health Nurses to continue in their roles until the end of June 2023.

Discussion

2020-2021 and 2021-2022 School Years

Following an extended school closure in the spring of 2020, the priority of the WDG Public Health School-Focused Nurses during the 2020-2021 school year was to support school reopening. From September 2020 to June 2021, WDG Public Health provided Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) consultation visits to 142 schools. These visits involved reviewing the adapted Public Health Ontario (PHO) Schools Reopening Checklist, providing support with implementing IPAC recommendations and answering any COVID-19 related questions. The School-Focused Nurses were also responsible for school case and outbreak management.²

During the 2021-2022 school year, IPAC assessments continued, as did case and outbreak management until December 2021 when COVID-19 case counts became too high to track.

The 2021-2022 school year was also an opportunity for catching up on lapsed school-based immunizations. WDG Public Health resumed the provision of in-school vaccine clinics for all grade 7 and 8 classes in October 2021.³

In November 2021, the COVID-19 vaccine was approved for children 5-11 years old, and School-Focused Nurses worked in community-based clinics dedicated to this population.

2022-2023 School Year

With COVID-19 restrictions relaxed in the spring of 2022, the 2022-2023 school year has, in many ways, resembled a pre-COVID-19 learning environment. This, paired with the flexibility that was built into the funding agreement, has allowed the School-Focused Nurses to resume school health promotion activities.

To guide priorities, findings from the WDG Public Health's current Well-being and Health Youth (WHY) Survey were reviewed. The WHY survey collects self-reported information every two years from students in grades 4-12, as well as parents and staff in WDG schools. Most recently, the surveys were completed in November 2019 and again in February 2022. The 2022 student results showed poorer outcomes for all mental health indicators compared to the 2019 results. For example, there was a 68% increase

in the percentage of students who reported often or always struggling with eating issues. Overall, most indicators of mental health assets, such as having a positive view of the future or high self-esteem, decreased by between 5% to 12%. Conversely, indicators related to mental health challenges, such as psychological distress and thoughts of suicide, tended to increase between 15% to 35%.⁴

Healthy Schools Certification

Based on key findings from the WHY Survey, the School Health team decided to promote the Healthy Schools certification program through the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (Ophea). The Healthy Schools Approach engages the whole school community to promote and enhance the health and well-being of children, youth, school staff and the broader community. Healthy Schools Certification is guided by the following goals⁵:

1. To support schools that want to enhance the health and well-being of their students and staff.
2. To increase student engagement and leadership opportunities to support health and well-being at school.
3. To increase adult engagement in prioritizing health and well-being at school.
4. To strengthen community engagement and partnerships.

Healthy Schools Certification is based on a four-step Healthy Schools Process, inspired by the Canadian Healthy School Standards and Canada's Comprehensive School Health Framework.⁵ Schools must assemble a team, identify their school community's priorities and assets, develop a plan and take action, and finally, celebrate and reflect. This process helps schools plan and implement activities that promote well-being in the school community, focusing on a health topic that is important to the school. Schools participating in Healthy Schools Certification can focus on up to three of the following health topics based on their priorities:

- Mental Health
- Physical Activity
- Healthy Eating
- Injury Prevention
- Growth & Development
- Substance Use

Over the course of the school year, schools execute their plan and document each step in an online dashboard. Through a point-based system, schools apply for Gold, Silver or Bronze-level certification.

In September 2022, all public, catholic and French-language elementary and secondary schools in WDG were invited to register for Ophea's Healthy Schools certification program. WDG Public Health also offered \$500 grants to support schools' activities. Upon receiving a school's grant application, a virtual meeting was arranged with a School-Focused Nurse on the School Health team. Schools were encouraged to consider their confidential WHY survey school profiles when selecting their priority health topic. The School-Focused Nurse also provided guidance and suggestions around activities that would engage the whole school community. Following a virtual meeting, the School-Focused Nurse provided schools with a template to record details about their activities and plans for use of the grant funds. This information was reviewed by the School Health team prior to awarding grants to the schools.

The deadline to register for Ophea's Healthy Schools certification program was November 25, 2022. In total, 20 schools in WDG registered for the program. Of these 20 schools, 13 schools applied for, and were awarded, a \$500 grant from WDG Public Health to support their activities. Seven (7) of the 13 schools selected mental health as their priority health topic, two (2) schools selected physical activity, one (1) school selected mental health and physical activity and three (3) schools selected healthy eating as their priority health topic.

Some examples of school initiatives include:

- "Wellness Wednesday" activities
- Intramurals
- Zen Den Club
- Positive affirmation mirrors
- Hiking club
- Guest speakers
- H2O challenge
- Wellness fair
- Meditation training
- Wellness hub
- Mental health street signs

The School Health team will continue to support schools as they work towards achieving their Healthy Schools certification this school year. School-Focused Nurses will check in with each school at various points between January and April to get an update on their progress. This will allow for opportunities to discuss and address any barriers to successful implementation of schools' planned activities. School-Focused Nurses can also assist schools with reporting in Ophea's online dashboard. For schools to be eligible for Healthy Schools certification, all reporting must be completed by May 5, 2023. At the end of the 2022-2023 school year, the School Health team will complete an evaluation to learn how WDG Public Health can better support schools with the Healthy Schools certification process.

Health Equity Implications

There are 104 public, catholic and French-language elementary and secondary schools in WDG. In order to identify priority schools, the School Health team references schools' individual WHY survey profiles and works with the Health Analytics team to analyze marginalization data for different school communities.

Conclusion

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the role WDG Public Health has played in supporting schools with their response, school health promotion work has been essentially on hold since March 2020. The flexibility provided by the SFN Initiative has allowed the School Health team to resume school health promotion activities during the 2022-2023 school year. This work is critical to achieving the optimal health of school-aged children and youth in WDG, particularly in the wake of the pandemic.

Ontario Public Health Standards

Foundational Standards

- Population Health Assessment
- Health Equity
- Effective Public Health Practice
- Emergency Management

Program Standards

- Chronic Disease Prevention and Well-Being
- Food Safety

- Healthy Environments
- Healthy Growth and Development
- Immunization
- Infectious and Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control
- Safe Water
- School Health
- Substance Use and Injury Prevention

2023 WDGPH Strategic Directions

People & Culture: We will maximize relationships through meaningful in-person interaction. Further integrate equity, diversity, and Inclusion objectives throughout the organization and equip ourselves for change.

Partner Relations: We will strategically collaborate with partners to address priority health issues in the community, re-engage with community partners and work with a range of partners to achieve positive health outcomes.

Health System Change: We will ensure we are positioned to be an agent of change within the broader health sector, advance the work of Ontario Health Teams and lead change in public health.

References

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Appendices

N/A.