

Partnership Initiatives

2022-2023

Summary Report of Partnership Initiatives between the
Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit and School Boards for
the Board of Health

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DISTRICT HEALTH UNIT

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INTRODUCTION

The Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit (SMDHU) is guided by the Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS, 2021) to promote optimal health of school-aged children and youth, through partnership and collaboration with school boards and schools. To this end, the SMDHU and local school boards within Simcoe Muskoka have a longstanding partnership in support of student health, well-being, and learning.

Building on the success of partnerships to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SMDHU identified three key priorities in our Return to School Plan for the 2022-2023 School Year:

- Continued COVID-19 Prevention and Protection.
- Partnership to address indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Gradual resumption of routine public health programming in schools.

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of key highlights from public health programs and services delivered within school settings during the 2022-2023 school year.

COVID-19 PREVENTION AND PROTECTION.

The SMDHU and local school boards assigned COVID-19 leads to liaise, as needed, throughout the school year. Ontario provincial guidance was followed for health and safety measures in schools. Local recommendations pertaining to health and safety, personal protective measures and requirements for absenteeism reporting were communicated to school boards via the assigned COVID-19 leads, and publicly via the health unit's website. In total, the SMDHU received 3 reports of increased absenteeism in schools during the 2022-2023 school year. Each report was assessed and recommendations were provided to the school boards' designated COVID-19 leads, as appropriate.

PARTNERSHIP TO ADDRESS INDIRECT IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

During the 2022-2023 school year, collaborative discussions occurred with 3 publicly funded school boards and one neighbouring public health unit to establish new and/or updated written partnership agreements. In line with the recommendations of the Council of Directors of Education (CODE) and Council of Medical Officers of Health (COMOH), the agreements demonstrate a mutual commitment to work together to meet legislated requirements pertaining to health and education; further, they will serve as a foundation by which to guide future priority setting and collaboration for the planning, development and implementation of comprehensive health promotion, disease prevention and health protection initiatives that contribute to the health and well-being of whole school communities.

GRADUAL RESUMPTION OF ROUTINE PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAMMING IN SCHOOLS.

Ongoing partnership and collaboration with school boards and school communities during the 2022-2023 school year provided opportunity for the SMDHU to gradually resume many routine public health programs that had been paused during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Monthly meetings were held with representatives from three school boards and communication occurred with additional school boards in Simcoe Muskoka, as needed, to support coordinated planning and implementation of health and well-being initiatives.

Members of the School Health program also participated in two school board committees, by request.

Routine Immunizations:

Support from local school boards to review and distribute SMDHU communications was instrumental as the Immunization program encouraged families to update their child's immunization record and catch up on outstanding routine immunizations. In total, the Immunization program hosted 373 clinics at elementary and secondary schools within Simcoe Muskoka for routine immunizations among students in grades 7 to 12. Suspension orders under the ISPA were not enforced by the SMDHU in 2022-2023.

Routine Dental Screening:

The Oral Health program expanded routine dental screening in 2022-2023 school year in response to the pandemic's impact on access to services. SMDHU screened over 40,000 students across all school boards. School screening helped identify over 2500 students in need of dental care and referral to the Healthy Smiles Ontario Program.

Outreach Visits by School Health Public Health Nurses (PHNs):

Between September to December 2022, 100% of publicly funded elementary and secondary schools in Simcoe Muskoka were contacted by a PHN to participate in an outreach visit.

- ~80.4% (148) of these schools participated in an outreach visit with their assigned PHN.
- The majority (137) participated in person; 11 participated by telephone or virtual meeting.

Simcoe Muskoka also has 14 Alternative school campuses; each was contacted by their assigned School Health PHN to offer outreach; 3 participated in an outreach visit.

Mental health was the most common health topic identified by schools. Other common topics identified as priorities included: nutrition/healthy eating, physical activity, vaping. Additional topics identified included: substance use, sexual health, sleep, sun safety, and online safety.

Healthy Schools Initiatives:

School Health PHNs worked with 41 schools to support the development of a comprehensive school health action plan to address the schools' identified health and well-being goals. PHNs facilitated collaboration with Public Health Dietitians and other SMDHU programs for added content expertise, as needed. Thirty schools also engaged their assigned School Health PHN as a member of their Healthy Schools team or committee.

One school board encouraged all of their schools to participate in the Ophea Healthy Schools Certification process. A [list of Healthy Schools certified schools](#) was released by Ophea in June 2023; 113 schools in Simcoe Muskoka achieved Healthy Schools certification.

Mental Health Promotion:

Monthly meetings were held with Mental Health Leaders from two school boards, with consultation and collaboration throughout the school year. Consultation with Mental Health Leaders from a third school board occurred, as needed, through established communication channels.

School Health PHNs engaged in consultations, supported action plan development, and worked with schools to implement a variety of “Tier 1” mental health promotion activities. The nurses also worked with 21 schools to promote, and support use the School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) resources within the school environment.

Additionally, PHNs worked collaboratively with 4 schools to raise awareness about and apply the Search Institute’s Developmental Assets ® framework, and with 10 elementary schools to implement the Healthy P.A.L.S (Playground Activity Leaders in Schools) program.

School Food & Nutrition:

School Health PHNs recommended and referred services of a Public Health Dietitian to develop and implement action plan activities to address school food and nutrition. The School Health Public Health Dietitian responded to 54 requests for service from Simcoe and Muskoka schools and school boards throughout the school year. Common topics of interest included food insecurity and food access, awareness raising regarding stigma associated with weight bias and teasing, skills development for educators regarding use of food neutral language, and providing curriculum supports related to body image.

Support of the Public Health Nutritionist was sought related to school board health and well-being initiatives and nutrition policy review. One school board engaged the SMDHU in a review of their existing School Nutrition Policy.

You’re the Chef:

Discussions with school boards led to a re-launch of You’re the Chef in winter 2023. Promotion of this program occurred, and virtual training was introduced for the first time; yet most individuals chose to attend in-person. Overall, one in-person training session was delivered in Barrie and one virtual training session was delivered for Muskoka schools. Among participants (n=15), feedback was positive. In particular, the virtual component facilitated attendance when conditions for in-person were challenging. Where barriers and/or recommendations were noted, the School Health program plans to explore opportunities to enhance the program further.

Student Nutrition Programs:

A Public Health Dietitian participated as chairperson of the Eat Well to Excel local partnership committee (Simcoe) and liaised with the Student Nutrition Program Muskoka committee. Nutrition support and consultation was provided to Student Nutrition Program coordinators, volunteers and school staff as requested. The most common requests for Registered Dietitian support included requesting less expensive food ideas, alternate or new ideas for snack bins, tips to make food selection more nutritious, adding more vegetable and fruit options, and food safety training supports.

School Travel Planning - 'On the Move':

The Chronic Disease Prevention (CDP) program continued their work with the On the Move initiative, which is designed to increase physical activity and encourage active modes of transportation to and from school. The CDP program continued to work with 11 of the original 17 schools that signed on to participate in the On the Move pilot which began in 2019 with funding from Green Communities Canada. Three school boards, the Simcoe County Student Transportation Consortium, 12 municipalities, 2 police services and 1 environmental group provided representation on the "On the Move Steering Committee" during the 2022-2023 school year. For schools not enrolled in the pilot program, PHNs provided support in the form of consultation, and information and resource sharing.

Human Development & Sexual Health:

The Sexual Health program engaged in discussions with three school boards to inform resumption of support for educators delivering the human development and sexual health components of the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum.

Sexual Health Clinic Services have also resumed at Muskoka area secondary schools, from one school board. PHN presence in these schools has been well received by both staff and students.

Simcoe Muskoka Drug Strategy:

The Substance Use and Injury Prevention program received a commitment from two school boards to participate on the Simcoe Muskoka Drug Strategy Community Advisory Committee, a multi-sector collaboration formed to address the opioid crisis in Simcoe and Muskoka, and the harms it is causing to individuals, families and communities. This work aims to address opioid-related harms in our region, including substance misuse, addiction, and overdose.

Vaping Prevention:

During the 2022-23 school year, the Smoke-Free Program's Health Promotion team communicated with 47 Simcoe Muskoka schools about vaping and the *Not An Experiment* (NAE) initiative. In partnership with the School Health program, 36 schools received support with vaping prevention and cessation programming using the NAE initiative, reaching 2,052 elementary and 9,637 high school students, 302 education staff and 10,741 parents.

Over the course of the school year, 36 schools implemented at least one component of *Not An Experiment*.

- Seventy percent of these schools reported using the printed prevention materials (e.g., posters); 60% implemented the escape room activity and a comparable percent used NAE's cessation support print materials.
- Nearly half implemented messaging and/or the cloud activity to encourage vaping to be taken outside and off school property.
- The numbers provided in this report do not account for any schools that accessed NotAnExperiment.ca and implemented the program without SFP-HP consultation.
- Presentations were also provided at two COMPASS meetings in Simcoe County.

Smoke Free Ontario Act (SFOA) Inspections:

The Smoke-Free Program's enforcement team attended secondary schools throughout Simcoe Muskoka at the request of school administrators to provide enforcement support related to SFOA, 2017. Forty-six secondary schools (including alternative secondary school campuses and private schools) were visited during the 2022-2023 school year resulting in a total of 253 SFOA, 2017 routine and compliance inspections. Vaping, tobacco and cannabis violations resulting in 43 charges and 169 warnings being formally issued to students at 18 secondary school.

Food Safety Inspections and Food Handler Training:

During the 2022-2023 school year, the Public Health Inspectors from the Environmental Health Department conducted a total of 139 inspections in schools from local school boards. These inspections include Student Nutrition Programs, cafeterias and hospitality programs.

The Food Safety Program also received and responded to 6 requests to conduct Food Handler Training programming in secondary schools.

Safe Water:

Ensuring safe drinking water in schools is a shared responsibility between school boards, the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks and the SMDHU. The health unit responded to numerous adverse water quality incidents at local schools and child care centres involving sodium, nitrate and lead exceedances as well as power outages that impact the effectiveness of water treatment equipment.

The health unit also worked collaboratively with several school boards during a large community Legionella investigation in the fall of 2022. Cooling tower assessments and environmental sampling occurred to ensure the safety of students, staff and the surrounding community.

MOVING AHEAD TO 2023-2024.

The strategic partnerships between the school boards and the SMDHU play a critical role in helping us achieve our mission of preventing disease and injury and protecting the health of residents in Simcoe County and the District of Muskoka. For the 2023-2024 school year the SMDHU will continue to partner with local school boards on the resumption and renewal of school-based public health services, guided by the principles of health equity and recognizing the indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The SMDHU also looks forward to fostering and strengthening our relationship with school boards, schools and school communities. Using a comprehensive approach, together, we can promote healthy school communities that promote optimal student well-being and learning.

CONCLUSION.

This report summarized the collaborative efforts of the health unit and local school boards during the 2022-2023 school year. The initiatives described provide examples of the partnership and mutual commitment between our organizations to support student health and well-being.

To access additional information about any of the initiatives described in this report, please consult the SMDHU website at www.simcoemuskokahealth.org or contact the School Health Program Manager, Stephanie Ross at 705-721-7520, ext. 7337, or stephanie.ross@smdhu.org.