

Partnership Initiatives

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

2023-2024

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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.

For the 2023-2024 school year, the SMDHU identified two key priorities to guide collaborative work with local school boards and schools in support of student health, well-being, and learning:

- Partnerships
- Programs & Services

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of key highlights from our work with school boards and schools during the 2023-2024 school year. Together, we continue to work towards achieving our vision of making school communities a healthy place for all.

PARTNERSHIPS

The SMDHU appreciates our ongoing partnership with school boards and schools in Simcoe Muskoka to promote optimal health, well-being and learning potential of school-aged children and youth. Highlights of successful collaboration in 2023-2024 included:



Partnership Agreements

At the start of the 2023-2024 school year, **3** local school boards had signed partnership agreements with the SMDHU. These agreements demonstrate a shared commitment to maintain a collaborative partnership in support of healthy school environments that foster student health, well-being and learning.

Discussions began with **2** additional school boards regarding the potential to develop a partnership agreement to guide future collaboration.



Priority Setting Meetings

3 school boards that had established partnership agreements with the SMDHU engaged in priority setting meetings between Directors of Education, Medical Officer of Health, and members of their respective organizations. Common priorities identified included: immunization, mental health and well-being, vaping prevention, hunger and food access. Additional priorities were identified by individual school boards and by the SMDHU to inform joint-planning and collaboration.



Designated School Board and Public Health Liaisons (PHNs)

The **7** publicly funded school boards in Simcoe Muskoka each delegated a representative to act as a liaison with the SMDHU. PHNs were assigned to act as liaisons on behalf of the SMDHU, helping to facilitate communication and collaboration with local school boards and neighbouring health units where applicable.

Monthly meetings were held between designated liaisons from the SMDHU and **3** school boards with established partnership agreements. School Board Mental Health Leaders also participated in these meetings which strengthened opportunities for partnership and integration of public health topics.

Ongoing communication occurred between designated liaisons from the SMDHU, the **7** school boards in Simcoe Muskoka, and neighbouring health units where applicable to enable coordinated planning and implementation of comprehensive school health and well-being programs and services throughout the school year.



Policy Development and Implementation

The SMDHU assisted **2** school boards with policy development, revision and/or implementation. This included consultation and support to develop **3** new policies/procedures, revisions to **4** existing policy/procedures, and implementation supports as needed.



Professional Development for School Leaders and Educators

2 school boards invited the SMDHU to participate in the delivery of professional development sessions for school leaders, educators and educational assistants. A total of **14** presentations were delivered on topics such as leading mentally healthy schools, mental health promotion and substance use/vaping prevention, and promoting a positive relationship with food.



Routine and Emergency Communications

The SMDHU routinely shared updates with school boards, schools and school communities about public health programming and to raise awareness about public health topics. The SMDHU also partnered with three school boards to send monthly communications home to families.

Emergency management notifications were sent to designated contacts at local school boards for dissemination to school staff and community stakeholders, as required. Topics of notifications included extreme weather, food safety recalls, and infectious diseases. The list of designated contacts for these emergency management notifications is reviewed and updated on an annual basis.



Data Collection and Sharing

The SMDHU monitors and provides access to local data to identify trends, priorities and inequities in the health of school-aged children and youth.

Local school boards were invited to contribute feedback to inform a redesign of the SMDHU's [HealthSTATs](#) website.

To increase availability of local data, the SMDHU began conversations with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and local school boards regarding the potential for participation in the 2025 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS). Based on past participation and preliminary interest expressed by several school boards in Simcoe Muskoka, the SMDHU agreed to partner with CAMH on the 2025 OSDUHS to purchase an oversample of an additional 1,000 students attending school in the Simcoe Muskoka area.



Local and Provincial Collaboration

The SMDHU provided representation on **3** committees from **2** local school boards.

Additionally, the SMDHU participated in a variety of local committees, networks, and coalitions along with school board representatives and community service providers. Examples include the:

- Child Youth and Family Services Coalition of Simcoe County
- COMPASS – Community Partners with Schools
- Eat Well to Excel (Simcoe County) and Student Nutrition Program Muskoka
- Muskoka Parry Sound Children and Youth Planning Table
- Women and Children's Network Child and Youth Planning Table

Other examples of local collaboration are described throughout this report.

The SMDHU also participated in several provincial networks and coalitions aimed at optimizing the health of school-aged children and youth through partnership in support of comprehensive school health.

The Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition (OHSC) approached the SMDHU to partner in bringing their annual conference to the Simcoe Muskoka Region. The conference was held in Orillia in May 2024 with attendance from school boards, schools, public health units and other cross-sector partners from across the province. This included representation from **3** school boards in Simcoe Muskoka.

- The SMDHU and the Simcoe County District School Board provided a panel discussion highlighting the ways we are 'working together to make every school a healthy school'.
- SMDHU representatives delivered breakout sessions on "Not an Experiment" and "On the Move".

PROGRAMS & SERVICES

In the 2023-2024 school year, the delivery of public health programs and services in schools was guided by [Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for Programs, Services and Accountability \(2021\)](#). Ongoing partnership and collaboration with local school boards enabled the SMDHU to meet Ministry of Health mandates and requirements for the provision of routine public health programming for schools and school communities.

The following public health programs and services were provided by the SMDHU through collaboration and support from local school boards:



Comprehensive School Health

The School Health Program encouraged and supported schools and school communities to identify and take action on a variety of public health topics, using a comprehensive school health approach.

- PHNs contacted **100% (187)** of publicly funded elementary and secondary schools to offer an outreach visit; **79% (147)** participated in an outreach visit.
- Mental health was the most common priority public health topic identified by schools.
- Other common topics identified as priorities included: hunger, food access and food insecurity, physical activity, substance use and vaping.

The supports and services provided to help address schools' identified needs and priorities varied based on an assessment of individual school board and school community needs and priorities. The School Health Program, which consists of PHNs and Registered Dietitians (RDs):

- Assisted **32** schools with the development of a school health action plan.
- Provided representation on **29** schools' health and well-being teams/committees.
- Partnered to offer student leadership opportunities in **10** schools with the PHN supporting students to lead health related activities in **69** classrooms and at **2** school community events.
- Engaged in a total of **407** consultations with school boards and/or schools.
- Provided **918** health education interventions including sharing public health information, resources, website recommendations and/or awareness raising presentations.
- Facilitated **262** internal referrals to other SMDHU programs.
- Facilitated **18** external referrals to help connect schools with external community partners.

One school board encouraged all their schools to participate in Ophea's Healthy Schools Certification. PHNs and RDs provided consultation and support to schools enrolled in the Healthy Schools Certification process, by request.

A list of [Healthy Schools Certified Schools](#) was released by Ophea in June 2024; **103** schools in Simcoe Muskoka achieved Healthy Schools Certification.



Mental Health and Well-Being

SMDHU representatives engaged in ongoing meetings with School Board Mental Health Leads from three school boards to collaborate in the delivery of mental health promotion programming.

At a school level, PHNs provided support to:

- **23** schools to implement school and classroom activities through School Mental Health Ontario.
- **3** schools to implement 'Kids Have Stress Too!', 'Stress Lessons' and/or parent presentations, from Strong Minds, Strong Kids: Psychology Canada.
- **5** schools to promote Developmental Assets ® and Developmental Relationships ®.
- **30** schools to provide PALS (Playground Activity Leadership in Schools) training.



Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction

Collaboration with school board and community partners regarding substance use prevention and harm reduction occurred through the Simcoe Muskoka Drug Strategy and local drug strategy tables.

PHNs from the SMDHU Substance Use and Injury Prevention program also partnered with school boards to address substance use prevention and harm reduction, including:

- **1** school board engaged SMDHU in consultation to inform development of a Naloxone policy.
- **4** professional development sessions for school leaders and/or educators.



Vaping Prevention – 'Not An Experiment'

The Smoke-Free Program partnered with 1 local school board to develop a vaping protocol, outlining roles and guiding action to comprehensively address the issue of youth vaping, with activities targeting education, prevention, and cessation. In addition:

- **1** train-the-trainer module was developed for educators.
- **1** principal meeting was attended by SMDHU staff to present on vaping and substance use prevention strategies and supports. **120** school leaders from one school board were in attendance.
- **3** professional development sessions on vaping prevention and substance use prevention were provided. **80** grade 7 and 8 educators from one school board were in attendance.
- In addition, **2** professional development sessions on vaping prevention and substance use prevention were provided to secondary educators at one school board.

The Smoke-Free Program provided consultation and support to help schools utilize [NotAnExperiment.ca](#) information, activities and resources (for Grades 7-12).

- **59** school specific requests were received.
- **25** elementary schools and **18** secondary schools implemented at least one component of the 'Not An Experiment' initiative.
- **2,891** elementary, **14,421** high school students, **1,037** educators and **8,707** parents were reached.



Food and Nutrition

1 school board engaged the SMDHU in consultation to inform revisions to their existing School Food and Beverage policy and procedures; **1** other school board engaged in consultation with SMDHU to support implementation of their existing policy and procedures.

The SMDHU's School Health Program and Chronic Disease Prevention programs collaborated to raise awareness about food insecurity in Simcoe Muskoka. A presentation about hunger, food access and food insecurity was provided to **1** school board, by request.

SMDHU representatives participated in the Eat Well to Excel local partnership table in Simcoe County and engaged in partnership meetings and consultation with the Student Nutrition Program in Muskoka. **23** consultations were provided to assist school boards, school staff and volunteers with understanding and applying current Student Nutrition Program – Nutrition Guidelines.

PHNs worked in collaboration with Public Health Nutritionists and Dietitians to support planning and implementation of Healthy Schools activities to address school food and nutrition.

- **82** requests for consultation and support were met from school boards and schools related to food and nutrition.
- **8** 'You're the Chef' training sessions were held, preparing **40** participants to become You're the Chef program facilitators for students ages 10 and up.



School Travel Planning – Simcoe Muskoka “On the Move”

The Chronic Disease Prevention program continued to facilitate engagement in School Travel Planning through the 'On the Move' initiative. **9** schools participated in 'On the Move' to increase daily physical activity for students and families and reduce traffic congestion around schools.



Human Development and Sexual Health

PHNs provided consultations and resources to support professional development for educators to assist with implementation of the human development and sexual health components of the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum.

The SMDHU received and supported requests from school boards and schools for:

- **30** requests for in-class presentations.
- Participation in **6** school health fairs.
- **1** educator consultation.
- **2** sexual health demonstration kits for educators.

101 sexual health clinics were provided in Muskoka area secondary schools, in partnership with the Trillium Lakelands District School Board. Through the delivery of these clinics, PHNs provided supports for students including pregnancy tests, emergency contraception, and referrals.



Immunization

In Ontario, under the Immunization of School Pupils Act (ISPA), public health units are required to collect and maintain up-to-date immunization records for all students. Routine immunization programming is also provided in selected grades.

Elementary:

- **30,534** elementary surveillance letters were sent to students in JK-Grade 5, as a reminder to update outstanding immunization records.
- **308** routine immunization clinics were held in schools for Grades 7 and 8.
- **9,504** students were immunized during school clinics and a total of **21,409** routine immunizations were administered.

Secondary:

- **17,890** letters were mailed home between January to August 2023 to alert secondary students that their immunization record was incomplete.
- **4,369** suspension orders were issued by the Medical Officer of Health to secondary students under the ISPA in the fall of 2023, and **1003** secondary student suspensions were enforced.
- Immunization coverage rates for the affected student cohort (2006-2007 birth year) increased from ~38% to ~95% coverage in 10 months time.



Dental Health

Dental health screenings were provided in all elementary schools, for students in JK/SK and Grades 2, 4 and 7. SMDHU screened **35,468** students in total and identified **1,715** students in need of urgent follow up care.

Upon request, the Oral Health Program provided general information, resources, and support to educate and raise awareness about oral health in elementary and secondary schools.

This work enabled SMDHU to assist parents and guardians with information on eligibility and enrollment in publicly funded dental programs, such as Healthy Smiles Ontario and the Canadian Dental Care Plan. Additionally, staff provided guidance to schools and families on navigating these services and programs.



Infectious Diseases

The SMDHU continued to encourage students, staff, and visitors in schools to use personal protective measures to reduce the spread of illness. Specific to school boards and schools within Simcoe Muskoka, the SMDHU received and responded to:

- **19** requests for consultation related to infectious diseases from the school board.
- **88** requests for consultation related to infectious diseases from schools.
- **106** reports of Diseases of Public Health Significance.
- **57** reports of increased absenteeism.
- **16** complaints related to infection prevention control.

The SMDHU also provided mid-year communications to assist school boards and schools with measles preparedness.



Safe Water

During the 2023-2024 school year, public health inspectors responded to over **25** adverse drinking water quality incidents, including lead exceedances, across Simcoe and Muskoka.

The SMDHU also proactively consulted with school boards to assess for the presence of water-cooling towers in school board or school buildings. The information provided by school boards will be used to inform the development of a legionella preparedness strategy.



Public Health Inspections

Public Health Inspectors completed inspections* in schools operating as food premises and/or personal service settings:



91 (100%) food premises including school cafeterias, hospitality rooms and Student Nutrition Programs were inspected.

9 (100%) hairstyling and aesthetics courses offered in secondary schools were inspected.

*Note: Inspection frequencies do not align with school year timeline. These inspections include routine, follow up, complaint and on demand. The vast majority are routine.



Smoke-Free Ontario Act, 2017 (SFOA, 2017) Enforcement

During the 2023-24 school year, the Smoke-Free Program's Enforcement Team attended secondary schools at the request of school administrators to provide enforcement support related to SFOA, 2017 vaping, tobacco, and cannabis violations resulting in **30** charges and **145** warnings being formally issued to students at **17** secondary schools throughout Simcoe Muskoka.

51 secondary schools (including alternative and private schools) were visited and a total of **258** SFOA, 2017 routine and compliance inspections were completed.

PLANNING FOR 2024-2025

The Ministry of Health is leading a Strengthening Public Health initiative with a goal to optimize capacity, stability and sustainability in public health and deliver more equitable health outcomes for Ontarians. As a result of this initiative, revisions to the Ontario Public Health Standards are anticipated for implementation in 2025. The strategic partnerships that have been established between the SMDHU and local school boards will continue to play a critical role in helping to achieve our mission of promoting health, preventing disease and injury and protecting the health of those who live, work and learn in Simcoe County and the District of Muskoka.

CONCLUSION

This report summarizes the collaborative efforts of the SMDHU and local school boards during the 2023-2024 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.