

# Working together for Healthy Schools

A summary of public health initiatives delivered in partnership  
with school boards and schools within Simcoe Muskoka

*Prepared for the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit  
(SMDHU) Board of Health on September 2025*

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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.

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of key highlights from our work with school boards and schools during the 2024-2025 school year. The activities described within this report provide examples of our ongoing efforts to work together to create healthier schools and school communities.

## SCHOOL BOARD PARTNERSHIPS

The SMDHU appreciates our ongoing partnership with the seven publicly funded school boards and schools throughout Simcoe Muskoka. Highlights of successful collaboration in 2024-2025 included:



### Partnership Agreements

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



### Priority Setting

**Two** school boards engaged in priority setting meetings between Directors of Education, Medical Officer of Health, and members of their respective organizations at the start of the 2024-2025 school year.

In addition, ongoing discussions related to priority setting and partnership occurred with designates from all local school boards and the SMDHU through established school board liaison assignments and monthly meetings.

The SMDHU identified key priorities for the 2024-2025 school year including immunization and data collection to monitor child and youth health. Mental health promotion and vaping prevention were identified as shared priorities between the health unit and several local school boards. School boards also identified poverty, food access and social media and technology use as areas for enhanced partnership during the 2024-2025 school year.



### Designated School Board and Public Health Liaisons

The **seven** publicly funded school boards within Simcoe Muskoka each delegated a representative to act as a liaison with the SMDHU. The SMDHU, in turn, assigned Public Health Nurses (PHNs) as liaisons to help facilitate communication and collaboration with local school boards and with neighbouring health units where applicable.

Throughout the school year, monthly meetings were held between the designated liaisons from the SMDHU and **three** school boards with established partnership agreements. School Board Mental Health Leaders also participated in these meetings, which created valuable opportunities to strengthen partnerships and support the development of mutually beneficial school health and well-being initiatives.

Ongoing communication occurred between designated liaisons from the SMDHU, the **seven** school boards in Simcoe Muskoka, and neighbouring health units when appropriate to ensure coordinated planning and smooth implementation of comprehensive school health and well-being programs and services throughout the school year.



### Policy Development and Implementation

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



### Professional Development for School Leaders and Educators

**Two** school boards invited the SMDHU to participate in the delivery of professional development sessions for school leaders, educators and/or well-being ambassadors. Presentations were delivered on topics such as comprehensive school health, foundations of mental health promotion, screen time and social media, substance use/vaping prevention, and promoting a positive relationship with food. Specific examples are provided throughout this report.



### 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 important public health topics. SMDHU also partnered with school boards offering timely resources pertaining to a variety of public health topics for communications to families.

Emergency management notifications were sent to designated contacts at local school boards for dissemination to school staff and members of the school community stakeholders, as required. Topics of notifications included extreme weather 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

SMDHU monitors and shares local data to identify trends, priorities and health inequities among school-aged children and youth. Health status information is published online at SMDHU's [HealthSTATs](#) website, which was redesigned with input from school boards.

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. At this time, the SMDHU is awaiting further information from CAMH regarding local participation and survey data.



### Local and Provincial Collaboration

SMDHU provided public health expertise representation on **one** school board committee, to support school health and wellbeing.

The health unit also actively participated in various local committees, networks and coalitions alongside school board representatives and community service providers. These collaborative efforts focused on improving the health of school-aged children and youth across the regions. Examples include:

- Child Youth and Family Services Coalition of Simcoe County and sub-tables including COMPASS (Community Partners with Schools) Co-Management

- Children & Youth Planning Table – Muskoka, Nipissing, Parry Sound and ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and Resiliency (ACER) Subcommittee
- Eat Well to Excel, Simcoe County
- Student Nutrition Program Muskoka
- Muskoka Systems Review of Complex Child and Youth Mental Health needs/services
- Central Region North Women & Children's Health Network – Child and Youth Workgroup
- Simcoe Muskoka On the Move Advisory Committee
- Bradford West Gwillimbury On the Move Working Group
- Trillium Lakelands District School Board Community Partners Breakfast Meeting

Other examples of local collaboration are described throughout this report. The SMDHU also maintains partnerships with several provincial coalitions and networks dedicated to the promotion of healthy schools.

## PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAMS & SERVICES

In addition to strategic partnerships with school boards at various levels, the health unit delivered a wide range of programs and services to school boards, individual schools, and school communities. These initiatives addressed multiple public health topics, reflecting a coordinated effort to support student well-being and create healthier school environments.



### Comprehensive School Health

The School Health Program used a comprehensive approach to guide the delivery of programs and services in schools. Through ongoing assessment, consultation and collaboration with school leaders, educators, parents/families, students, other health unit programs and community partners, School Health PHNs worked with schools and school communities to identify and take action on a variety of public health topics.

- PHNs contacted **181 of 191** publicly funded elementary and secondary schools to offer an outreach visit; among those schools offered an outreach visit **143 (79%)** participated.
- Due to staffing vacancies on the School Health program, not all schools were offered an outreach visit in the fall of 2024.
- Mental health was the most common priority public health topic identified by schools.
- Other common topics identified as priorities included: physical activity, school food/nutrition, and substance use prevention (including tobacco 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. School Health Public Health Nurses:

- Provided representation on **35** school's health and well-being committees.
- Assisted **49** schools with the development of a school health action plan.
- Supported **69** schools with the implementation of action plan activities.
- Engaged in a total of **199** consultations with school boards and/or school leaders, educators and staff.
- Provided **510** health education interventions including sharing public health information, resources, website recommendations, awareness raising presentations, workshops and/or interactive displays at school events.

- Facilitated **163** internal referrals and 38 requests for service to other SMDHU programs.
- Facilitated **14** 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 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 2025; **105** schools in Simcoe Muskoka achieved Healthy Schools Certification.



## Mental Health Promotion

Members of the School Health Program engaged in ongoing meetings with School Board Mental Health Leads from **three** school boards to collaborate in the delivery of mental health promotion programming. **Two** school boards engaged PHNs in planning and/or delivering interactive professional development sessions for school leaders, well-being leaders / ambassadors, and/or educators. For example, School Health PHNs:

- Worked with Well-being Facilitators from **one** school board to co-develop presentations on the "Foundations for School Mental Health" for use by elementary and secondary schools during their Fall 2024 Professional Activity Days. The PHNs each attended **one** secondary school in their assigned area to co-present and provided consultation support to elementary schools by request.
- Facilitated presentations for elementary educators at **one** school board on "Screen time, social media, and student health" during professional development sessions hosted in the spring of 2025. PHNs also attended the afternoon portion of the event to connect with educators in attendance and assist with planning activities to put their learning into action.
- Participated in a Secondary Educator Symposium held at **one** school board in November 2024 and facilitated presentations on "The Power of Interactions: creating a supportive classroom environment for every student". A Public Health Nutritionist and Dietetic intern also delivered presentations on "Changing the Dialogue – fostering positive and inclusive nutrition environments at schools", which integrated concepts of healthy eating and mental health promotion.

At a school level, PHNs worked collaboratively with schools within their assigned geographic area to integrate mental health promotion as part a comprehensive school health approach. For example, they:

- Engaged in conversations with school leaders and educators to help raise awareness, share information, and encourage use of school and classroom resources available through School Mental Health Ontario.
- Worked with designated well-being ambassadors and student ambassadors from schools within **one** school board to plan and implement student led mental health promotion initiatives.
- Collaborated with **two** schools to implement 'Kids Have Stress Too!', 'Stress Lessons' and/or parent presentations, from Strong Minds, Strong Kids: Psychology Canada.
- Delivered presentations at **eight** schools to raise awareness about the Developmental Assets® and Developmental Relationships® frameworks.
- Delivered PALS (Playground Activity Leadership in Schools) facilitator training at **eight** schools and PALS student leader training at **four** schools.

Beyond the number of interventions delivered in the 2024-2025 school year, PHNs maintained ongoing and evolving relationships with schools. They supported schools in building on past initiatives, deepening engagement and reinforcing long-term outcomes for student health and well-being.



## Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction

Substance use prevention and harm reduction efforts continued locally through participation in the Simcoe Muskoka Drug Strategy and local drug strategy tables.

- **Three** school boards engaged SMDHU in discussions regarding participation in the Simcoe Muskoka Drug Strategy (SMDS) Community Partner Advisory Committee.
- **One** school collaborated with SUPHR and the Muskoka Drug Strategy to plan and facilitate a parent panel presentation on substance use prevention and harm reduction.

At the school level, Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction Program PHNs:

- Partnered with community agencies to host a hands-on learning event at **one** elementary school focused on teaching students' real-life safety skills.
- Delivered Real Wheel presentations to students in Grades 6–9, along with a family presentation held in the evening to extend learning to caregivers.
- Participated in various school events including open houses, curriculum nights, family wellness nights, and **one** mental health fair to connect with families and share resources on substance use and harm reduction.



## Vaping Prevention – Not An Experiment

The Substance Use Prevention and Harm Reduction program partnered with **one** local school board to provide professional development sessions about supporting change with students who vape substances. **75** educators were in attendance.

In addition, consultation and support was made available to elementary and secondary schools from all school boards across Simcoe Muskoka, helping them to utilize [NotAnExperiment.ca](https://www.notanexperiment.ca) information, activities and resources (for Grades 7-12). These services were delivered by request.

- **54** school specific requests were received.
- **27** elementary schools and **19** secondary schools implemented at least one component of the 'Not An Experiment' initiative.
- **2,241** elementary students, **17,198** high school students, **383** educators and **3,692** parents were reached.



## Food and Nutrition

To support improved food access in schools, 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.

PHNs and Public Health Nutritionists also worked in collaboration with schools to plan and implement activities that addressed school food and nutrition.

A total of **five** You're the Chef training sessions were scheduled and promoted during school outreach visits; however, all were cancelled due to low registration. You're the Chef training sessions were delivered individually to **four** schools. These sessions prepared school staff or community partners to become facilitators of the You're the Chef program, which supports food literacy and cooking skills for students aged 10 and up.



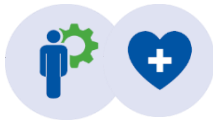
## School Travel Planning – Simcoe Muskoka On the Move

The Chronic Disease Prevention program continued to champion School Travel Planning by leading the Simcoe Muskoka On the Move Advisory Committee and the 'On the Move' initiative.

This year, **13** schools from **two** school boards joined On the Move to boost daily physical activity among students and families while tackling traffic congestion and improving safety around schools.

To support this work, Bradford West Gwillimbury On the Move Working Group was established. This collaborative effort between the SMDHU, the Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury and representatives from two school boards brought key partners together to plan and implement a community-wide approach to On the Move. Starting in the fall of 2025, **13** schools in the Bradford West Gwillimbury area will be invited to participate in a variety of activities designed to get students moving and make school zones safer for everyone.

Additionally, the Simcoe Muskoka On the Move Advisory Committee has identified policy recommendations for school boards to support and enhance active school travel. These policy recommendations are in the process of being discussed internally within participating local school boards.



## Human Development and Sexual Health

PHNs offered consultations and resources to assist educators with professional development, helping them to teach 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:

- **Nine** in-class presentations.
- **Two** school health fairs.
- **Six** educator consultations.
- **Five** sexual health demonstration kits for educators.

A total of **21** sexual health clinics were provided in **three** 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. As in previous school years, the Immunization Program conducted record review and

enforced suspensions in select grades.

### Elementary record review and suspensions

Preparation for record review and suspensions in the 2024-2025 school year began in January 2024:

- **9,261** reminder letters sent home in backpacks with elementary school students in January 2024 that their immunization record was incomplete.
- **7,554** second reminder letters mailed home in June 2024.
- **6,905** third and final reminder letters sent home in backpacks in November 2024.
- **4,367** suspension orders were issued by the Medical Officer of Health to elementary students in Grades 4, 5, & 6.
- **1,296** suspension orders were enforced on February 4, 2025 for students in Grades 4, 5, & 6.



In addition, **5,856** reminder letters were sent home with Junior and Senior Kindergarten students as a reminder to submit or update their immunization records. Suspension orders were not issued for Kindergarten students.

### Secondary record review and suspensions

**7,424** reminder letters were mailed home in May 2025 to alert secondary students that their immunization record was incomplete. Suspension orders will be mailed in September for those who remain outstanding with suspensions to be enforced on Tuesday September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025.

### School-based immunizations for Grade 7 students

The SMDHU also offered the school-based grade 7 immunization program in all elementary schools throughout Simcoe Muskoka. Nurses visited each school twice during the 2024-2025 school year to provide hepatitis B, human papillomavirus (HPV), and meningococcal vaccines.

- **334** routine immunization clinics were held in schools for Grades 7s, with catch ups offered to Grade 8 students in the Spring.
- **5,871** students were immunized during school clinics and a total of **23,367** routine immunizations were administered.



### Dental Health

Dental health screenings were provided in all elementary schools, for students in JK/SK and Grades 2, 4 and 7. SMDHU screened **34,999** students in total and identified **1,889** students in need of urgent follow up care.

Where needs were identified, staff helped parents and guardians understand their child's eligibility for publicly funded dental programs, such as Healthy Smiles Ontario and the Canadian Dental Care Plan and supported them with the enrollment process. Staff also offered guidance to schools and families on how to access and navigate these valuable programs and services, helping to ensure that students received dental care.

Upon request, the Oral Health Program also supported elementary and secondary schools to access information, resources, and educational materials to help raise awareness about dental health.



### 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:

- **33** reports of Diseases of Public Health Significance.
- **20** calls related to other non-reportable diseases.

The SMDHU also provided information to assist **three** school boards and schools with measles preparedness. This proactive messaging to schools and boards provided details regarding processes SMDHU would take in the event of confirmed exposures in their settings. Consultation occurred between health unit and school board leaders throughout the school year to inform planning, as needed.



### Infection Prevention and Control

- **Five** requests for consultation related to infection prevention and control from **two** school boards and schools.
- **Six** reports of increased illness and/or absenteeism at schools in Simcoe Muskoka, for which public health recommendations were sought.
- **Four** complaints related to infection prevention control.
- **One** request from one school board to review a “Return to School” resource.
- Resources were provided to a secondary school from **one** school board related to the Know B4 U Go campaign.



### Safe Water

During the 2024-2025 school year, public health inspectors responded to over **15** adverse drinking water quality incidents, including lead exceedances, across Simcoe and Muskoka.



### Public Health Inspections

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

- A variety of food premises including school cafeterias, hospitality rooms and Student Nutrition Programs were inspected.
- **13 (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 2024-25 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 **25** charges and **105** warnings being formally issued to students at **18** secondary schools throughout Simcoe Muskoka.

**49** secondary schools (including alternative, adult and private schools) were visited and a total of **205** SFOA, 2017 routine and compliance inspections were completed.

## PLANNING FOR 2025-2026

The Ministry of Health is leading a Strengthening Public Health initiative, with updates to the Ontario Public Health Standards expected in 2025. These changes will help shape the future of public health service delivery across the province. In this evolving landscape, strong partnerships between SMDHU and local school boards remain essential.

## CONCLUSION

The initiatives highlighted in this report reflect the power of collaboration and shared commitment to student health and well-being. These achievements would not be possible without the continued support and partnership of local school boards and schools. We are grateful for the strong relationships we have built and look forward to working together in the year ahead to continue creating healthier school communities for all.

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