WHAT FACILITATES SUSTAINABLE CHANGE? WHAT GETS IN THE WAY? OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES!

Sustainable Strategies for Safe Schools

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What Facilitates Sustainable Change? What Gets in the Way?

Opportunities and Challenges!

You will experience both opportunities and challenges when implementing sustainable change. Though it is important to be aware of potential barriers to implementing and sustaining a violence prevention strategy, it is arguably much more important to recognize and build on the opportunities that will facilitate planning for and implementation of sustainable changes. While it is sometimes difficult to anticipate challenges, focussing on the positive opportunities will help you to overcome the barriers that arise along the way. In this chapter, we will examine what factors facilitate implementation of sustainable change, and what barriers and challenges you may encounter. We will start by clarifying what we mean by *sustainable* change.

What is sustainable change?

Sustainability means different things to different people. In some cases, the issues that surround sustainability of a program are the same challenges faced in implementing the program in the first place. The principals and vice-principals we interviewed for this project were talking about difficulties in sustaining programs, but their comments frequently spoke to the challenges of implementation as well.

While many define sustainability simply as maintaining a program on an ongoing basis, Michael Fullan finds that it is much more than that.

Sustainability is the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose (Fullan, 2005).

Hargreaves and Fink put a similar emphasis on the capacity of a system to be self-sustaining and not preclude innovation.

Sustainability does not simply mean whether something will last. It also addresses how particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment now and in the future (Hargreaves & Fink, 2000, p. 32).

For the purposes of this book, we see sustainability as embracing both concepts: the ongoing maintenance of a program, and the capacity to adapt to changing needs. Thus, sustainability is a process rather than an outcome.

Research on Opportunities and Barriers to Sustainable Change

Over a period of three years, we studied 23 schools as they attempted to implement sustainable strategies for violence prevention. In addition, we interviewed principals or vice-principals twice about what they feel facilitates sustainable change and what barriers and challenges they encountered when implementing sustainable safe schools programs.

The first interview with principals occurred early in the intervention, toward the end of the first year of the study. We asked the school administrators to reflect on barriers and challenges that each partner in education faces in sustaining violence prevention programs and strategies. We also asked them to indicate which barriers were most significant, and which assets or strengths made the most positive contribution to sustainable safe schools programs. Due to time constraints on the part of some principals, we conducted interviews with 15 of our 23 participating school administrators.

In the second year of the implementation process, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 school administrators about their experiences in implementing safe school goals. These goals were established through our process of assessing the schools' needs and applying a stage-based model of change. In all cases, the emphasis was on their experience with sustainable change and, in particular, on their experience with using a process-oriented approach to assessing their school's needs. We asked school administrators to reflect on what facilitated their implementation of a safe school plan, and what barriers and challenges they had encountered.

In addition to the principal interviews and our own observations, information obtained from the Ontario Principal's Council survey referred to in Chapter 1 also informed our thinking on the challenges to and opportunities for sustainable violence prevention programs and strategies.

What are the barriers and challenges to sustainable change?

We have identified eight themes that were consistently mentioned by administrators when talking about barriers and challenges to the sustainability of safe schools programs.

Barrier #1: The Ministry of Education and the school boards need to allow for flexibility at the school level when developing policy for a diverse population

Principals told us that Ontario's great diversity of people—urban and rural, aboriginal and immigrant—presents a unique challenge to the formulation of policies and legislation. It is a challenge to form policies that are workable in all situations in this vast province. Likewise, the amalgamated district school boards cover vast geographic areas with diverse populations. For school administrators, policies developed by the Ministry of Education and the larger school boards may not reflect the situation at their local school, and often do not provide them with the flexibility they need to take action at the school level.

> **Principals told us...**
>
> *I looked at the challenges that they (Ministry of Education) would face, the breadth and scope of the problem. How do you collect data? How do you understand the problem? There is urban versus rural. How do you account for cultural diversity? So, if you are developing a program, it may work in the south, but not in the north. Who do you put in charge? Where do you start?*
>
> *Balancing issues of equity...creating legislation that is flexible enough to be fair; firm enough to be effective.*

Barrier #2: Diverse needs of families and communities

Principals indicated that the diverse needs of their communities and the differing understanding of the school's role create challenges to sustaining safe school programs. In some communities, parents almost expect the school to raise their child. In other communities where there are large immigrant populations, the principals find that there is a different understanding of the school's role and response to situations (e.g., physical punishment is acceptable to some).

One principal told us...

Back home you were allowed to hit. Back home a parent would go to the school, tell them the problem and the school would take care of it. Understanding the system here is huge for our parents. (from a principal with a large population of new Canadians in her school)

Trying to change deeply-entrenched values is a complex problem. Principals' perceptions about the engagement of parents in the implementation and sustainability of safe schools reflect this complexity. Parents are often overwhelmed. Many are raising their children single-handedly, many are in a cultural milieu that is new to them, and many struggle daily to put food on the table. While the importance of literacy and numeracy is obvious to them, it is easier to dismiss issues that are by nature complex and whose influence on learning is much less obvious. Principals are thus often challenged to engage parents in safe schools issues.

Barrier #3: Conflicting priorities for educators and families

Several principals stated that conflicting priorities and time are the most significant barriers to sustaining safe school initiatives. Principals spoke of the various initiatives that their school boards were imposing on them. These initiatives are in many cases extremely important to improving the educational experience for children and youth. However, principals indicated that a safe school environment was one of the basic needs in the hierarchy of need for achievement: If schools are not safe and secure, learning will not take place.

Nonetheless, with so many external factors pressing the principals for time, maintaining a focus on providing a safe school environment is a challenge. Forces conspire to keep principals in a reactive mode. Shifting from a reactive to a proactive mode requires huge effort and leadership skills.

> **Principals told us...**
>
> *I think that the challenge is that they (school administrators) are forced into a reactive role most of the time, putting out fires. Once all the fires are put out, there isn't necessarily the time to do the proactive thing.*
>
> *It takes an incredible amount of coordination of all stakeholders and sometimes with so many initiatives that are occupying our time and energy, it is tough to maintain the program you are trying to run…It is always geared towards curriculum. We don't have an opportunity to address the social issues that really affect kids in our schools.*

Staff members also face issues of time and conflicting priorities. The principals we talked to spoke of teachers who are challenged to integrate everything into a day given the

demands for programming and the frequent changes in direction from the Ministry, in particular.

> **Principals told us…**
>
> *The first thing is that the literacy project is a priority, and then incorporating character education and safe schools and making it all fit is a challenge for staff.*
>
> *Time for staff and the myriad of expectations that they are expected to carry out. I think there is a feeling of being overwhelmed.*
>
> *Time is the thread that runs through all things, having enough of it, using it effectively.*

Parents are also challenged by conflicting priorities, such as the challenge of putting food on the table, the challenge of the single parent raising a family alone, or the challenge of conflict between their own child's perceived needs and the needs of the other children.

> **A principal told us…**
>
> *I think they would like to have more involvement with creating anti-violence programs, but they are constrained because they have to put food on the table for their kids. Many parents at our school don't have jobs, or low paying jobs which limits their time and energy for involvement in school.*

Barrier #4: Teachers' and students' perceptions about responsibility for safe schools

Both teachers and students have slightly different but related issues with respect to understanding individual responsibility for safe schools. Principals indicated that they are not just introducing an academic program; they are also trying to change the school environment and change attitudes. In essence, they are tackling the challenge of changing

a culture. Some principals stated that school culture is the most significant problem that they encounter in trying to sustain violence prevention and safe schools programs.

> **Principals told us …**
>
> *I think the biggest one is trying to change the culture of the school environment and the community. You are trying to change your school environment and you realize that sometimes your efforts are being undermined by what's happening in the students' life outside of school.*
>
> *I understand that there are program issues but so are there safe schools issues. I've always looked at it as safe schools being the underlying environment in which we operate. We have to be sure to have a safe, positive environment so learning can occur. It is like the hierarchical level of needs. Until you have an environment where learning can occur, learning is not going to occur.*

The principals reported that staff members feel the effects of the complexity of the issue of providing sustainable safe school environments. Most staff members are aware of the importance of safe schools. Events in recent years in Columbine, Taber, and Toronto have conspired to make everyone aware of the importance of maintaining a safe school environment and addressing violence prevention. However, confronted with the challenge of being the agents of change in the school, staff may fail to see that they have an integral role to play. Indeed, in many cases, principals identified teacher attitudes in this respect as a barrier. According to principals, many teachers respond to safe school obligations by saying, "No, I am a teacher first."

> **A principal told us…**
>
> *Some teachers feel a responsibility to this cause and others either don't or don't feel comfortable addressing the issue…Everyone agrees it is a problem but not everybody agrees that they have a role in fixing it or on what the right approach is to fix it.*

Teachers should be encouraged to accept that creating an environment of safety in schools is their job. They also need to be good role models, and not undermine programs through their behaviour. In a recently published book, we made a case that violence prevention and health promotion efforts need to be rooted in the general climate of the school (Wolfe, Jaffe & Crooks, 2005, p. 270). Schools who are trying to address obesity and to encourage healthy eating and exercise need to remove their pop and chip vending machines and provide daily physical activity for their students. To discuss a healthy lifestyle without creating the climate that encourages it is quickly seen as hypocrisy by adolescents. We believe that any prevention program needs to target multiple levels to ensure fertile soil for long-term benefits to be realized. If the students see teachers bullying others or making sexist comments, it becomes difficult to sustain a safe school climate. Similarly, if students are wearing T-shirts that have violent or sexist messages, it becomes difficult to maintain an environment that is safe and welcoming to all.

The complexity of changing the culture of schools may be particularly challenging when it comes to engaging students in violence prevention programs. While many students acknowledge that there needs to be a change to a less violent culture, it is challenging for them to assist and risk appearing "not cool" in front of their peers. When it comes to reporting incidents of bullying or aggressive behaviour on the part of their peers, it becomes a matter of their own personal safety in some instances, or at least not risking the disapproval or their peers. Principals confirmed that students struggle under the influence of society outside the school and the very different messages they receive from school and their peers.

The administrators who responded to the Ontario Principals' Council survey indicated that strategies to more actively engage students in violence prevention activities would be very valuable.

Strategies to more actively engage students in violence prevention activities.
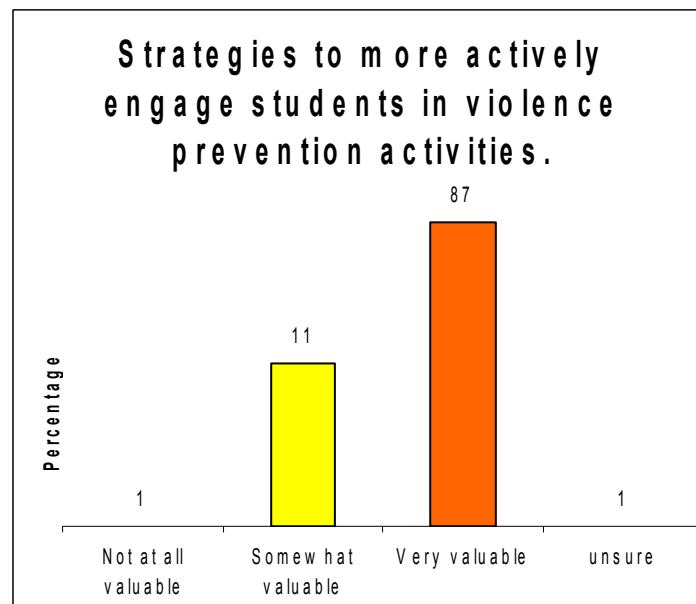
Barrier #5: Pervasive societal messages about the acceptability of violence

Faced with the complexity of the issue, principals pointed to society at large and the cultural milieu in which their students spend the bulk of their time. Principals referred to

the fact that the students are only in school for a few hours a day. They reported feeling overwhelmed by what kids are exposed to the other 18 hours a day. When asked about the barriers that students face, or that they face when dealing with students, more than half of the principals reported that mixed messages from school as opposed to the home are a real challenge in implementing and sustaining safe schools programs.

> **Principals told us…**
>
> *Most of our students grow up in a cultural milieu of violence as seen on T.V., news, day to day life. There is a clash of values between what we promote as being good citizens vs. what students see out there and how problems are solved in the real world.*
>
> *Speaking of parents, I think one of the biggest challenges is their lack of understanding of why it is such an important issue for schools to address. The whole mentality of boys will be boys.*

The attribution of external forces as a challenge to implementing and sustaining safe schools programs is well documented in the literature on school change. Dufour et al used the term "external focus" which they identified as "looking at the conditions outside of the organization that impede its progress or success" as a barrier to an action. They agree that educators must continue to confront society with the sense or urgency they feel regarding the situations they face at school, but they must also accept and acknowledge that there are things they can do within their school to influence and educate students. In fact, they state that educators can have a much more powerful influence than any external factors (Dufour, Eaker, & Dufour, 2005).

Barrier #6: Shortage of resources

The issue of having enough resources—including funds, programs, and materials—was repeatedly mentioned in terms of all of the partners in safe schools programming. Principals spoke of the limited resources available to them as the most significant barrier their community partners face in assisting schools to be safe. Principals receive strong support from the community, especially police services, but they acknowledged that these agencies are stretched thinly due to lack of financing and the resulting lack of personnel and resources. Principals spoke of long waiting lists, and programs that are inaccessible due to distance or lack of resources. Some principals referred to the fact that there are fewer agencies in rural areas than in urban. However, principals in urban areas felt that there were not enough agencies or resources in existing agencies to serve their students.

Principals told us…

Many community agencies are feeling overburdened with long waiting lists. They experience lack of resources, particularly human resources.

They are never a barrier. They are a big help. However, they are overwhelmed.

They have limited resources and broader responsibilities. They act in good faith, but they are stretched.

The Ministry of Education was seen as being the potential source of additional funds and materials to aid in maintaining strong violence prevention programs. Several principals mentioned that the ministry could be more effective not only in providing resources, but also in how resources are provided. "Money bombs" were mentioned by one principal as

being a particularly ineffective method of providing resources. School boards are expected to file applications for funding opportunities within very short timelines. These funding opportunities frequently do not relate to the board's priorities and planning and, in fact, discourage good planning and integration by the school boards.

Resources were the most frequently mentioned challenge for district school boards as well, including lack of resources and support from the school board. According to the principals, school boards are challenged to find the resources to train staff and support safe school programs. Although this was the most frequently mentioned challenge for school boards, one principal stated there were no challenges or lack of support from his school board. And another principal pointed out that while resources provided by the school board are helpful, all resources that the board might provide will not help "unless you have the desire of staff and administration to create a culture for safety." Many principals also recognized that much could be done at the school level.

Concerns were also raised about the need for additional staff resources at the school level.

Principals feel that an additional vice principal, a resource teacher, or a guidance teacher is needed to assist them to shift from a reactive position to a proactive position in terms of providing a safe school environment.

Barrier #7: Limited professional development opportunities

At the heart of any learning community is the opportunity for development and renewal of staff and administration. Principals identified the need for resources and time for professional development as a major barrier to sustainability of safe schools programs. Without the resources to pay to train staff in safe schools initiatives and programs, it is difficult to sustain the programs that are in place, especially considering that staff will change year to year. Some principals pointed to the provincial framework negotiated between the Ontario government and the teachers' federations as a barrier to finding the time for professional development.

> **Principals told us…**
>
> *I have one hour a month to inform the staff of what is going on, including professional development and all that is going on, and anti-bullying...We need more time with our staff. That is way bigger than money. Way bigger...I don't struggle with money things.*
>
> *Training for staff. How can I ensure that my staff members are all delivering the same message, using common language?*

The school administrators who responded to the Ontario Principals' Council survey endorsed the importance of professional development in violence prevention. A total of 97% of respondents felt that professional development opportunities were somewhat valuable or very valuable for assisting with implementing sustainable violence prevention programs. Equally important in the administrators' view is the opportunity for professional development for school administrators, with 98% responding that it is somewhat or very valuable.

Barrier #8: Administrative and staff turnover

Administrative turnover is a reality for many schools. In terms of this project, it has resulted in delays in arranging consultations, and some discontinuity in communication. It is too early to assess the effect that the changes in administration will have on the sustainability of safe schools programs, however it is evident that turnover is a factor. Of the 23 schools participating in the project, six experienced a change in principal in the first year of the project. One school has had three principals in the past year. Even in schools where there has been some succession planning, it takes principals a few months to adjust fully to a new school and to turn their attention to ongoing projects.

> **Principals told us…**
>
> *I think one of the issues is administrative transfers. I am very interested in bullying, but I may get transferred this year. It is the continuity, starting programs and keeping them sustained.*
>
> *Turnover in administration is an issue with a lot of these changes...All the studies; people like Fullan, all suggest it won't happen overnight. It takes about five years to get some of these changes embedded in the culture. Being able to maintain administrative complement is a help.*

Turnover also affects staff members and, in some cases, the loss of a key staff member can provide a significant blow to a safe school program. In one of our participating schools, the peer mediation program is on hold for a year until the teacher who had training in peer mediation returns from maternity leave. No other staff member was able to fill the gap for a year. Principals spoke of the need for succession planning to prepare for the loss of a significant staff leader.

> **Success story – Sustainability in the face of high administrative and staff turnover**
>
> *One of our principals established a Safe School Committee in response to recommendations from our initial consultation. He invited a staff representative from each division, the charge custodian, educational assistants, and representatives from the office staff, students, parents, and the community to join the committee. Both the principal and the vice-principals also attend the meetings. Meetings are held at lunch hour about three times a year.*
>
> *The committee addresses a broad range of safe school issues, including the Code of Conduct, emergency procedures, safety on the school yard, and physical plant issues (including having a safe school building and yard and the quick removal of graffiti). The initiatives of this committee include "pink day," violence awareness assemblies, a school safety audit, and school-wide programming for safe schools.*
>
> *The principal is very pleased with the work that the committee has accomplished and feels that it provides an excellent way of ensuring the sustainability of safe school initiatives through administrative and staff turnovers.*
>
> *It is important to note that the establishment of a safe school committee is mandated by the Province of Ontario:*
>> Each school must have in place a safe schools team responsible for school safety that is composed of at least one student (where appropriate), one parent, one teacher, one support staff member, one community partner, and the principal. The team must have a staff chair. An existing school committee (e.g., healthy schools committee) can assume this role.
>> Public/Program Memorandum, 144, Province of Ontario

Opportunities: What facilitates change?

Through our interviews and observations, we have identified seven themes that are consistently associated with successful and sustainable implementation of safe school programs and strategies.

Opportunity #1: Commitment, enthusiasm, and leadership from educational partners

The principals who participated in this project indicated that commitment, enthusiasm, and leadership from all partners in education are the most significant facilitators of sustainable change. In fact, this was the only factor that was mentioned when discussing the contribution that students and parents might make to sustainable safe schools programs and strategies.

> **Principals told us...**
>
> *Student involvement and enthusiasm makes it much easier to move safe schools goals forward.*
>
> *The (student-led) "Be the Change" committee makes the difference.*

While many other factors facilitate sustainable safe schools programming, most principals reported that commitment, enthusiasm, and leadership from both staff and school administration are critical elements in sustainable change. An overwhelming majority of principals indicated that staff support is the single most important factor in implementing sustainable safe schools strategies and program. The second most important element is a committed, enthusiastic, and supportive administrative team. In both of our interviews with principals, leadership and commitment from staff was highlighted as a significant asset or strength.

Fullan (1991) introduces his chapter on teachers and change by emphasizing their role in change, "Educational change depends on what teachers do and think—it's as simple and as complex as that." As he goes on to say, it follows that teachers have to understand the operational meaning of the change. Explaining the change and getting staff on board is essential to the implementation and sustainability of change. Teachers will support change if it is practical, addresses student needs, and has been demonstrated to be successful.

Opportunity #2: Developing capacity through staff development and training

Once the commitment to safe schools is made by the board and the principal, commitment to training and development can occur. The majority of administrators endorsed the importance of professional development in violence prevention, as well as the importance of finding opportunities for professional development. Visible support from the administrative team sends a positive signal to staff. Having a consistent message commitment in the administrative office are also key. The ministry and board must make

safe schools a high priority, and back up the message and commitment with training personnel and appropriate resources.

Another important factor in training and professional development is the engagement in succession planning. When key staff are transferred or move on, existing knowledge and experience must be communicated to new team members. Initial and ongoing training and professional development help create a proactive atmosphere rather than a reactive one.

> **Success story…Sustainability when losing a champion.**
>
> *The principal explained that this year, his school's head of drama who had played a leadership role with the school's theatre group the school was promoted to a position at the board office. The focus of the theatre group was on plays that dealt with social issues, including drugs, alcohol, bullying and domestic violence. The theatre group presented their plays in the district schools to raise awareness of these social issues. This program has been widely acclaimed, but was very much developed by this key drama person who went to the Board. The principal stated, "When you lose someone like that in school it is a blow."*
>
> *However, he went on to say that it was important to have succession planning. The theatre group is something that is owned by a lot of people in the school, not just one or two. In this case, some senior students were very vested in program and strong. As well, the school had another teacher who had been supportive and knew what was gong on. The teacher who had left also provided what assistance and advice when she could. The Principal re-emphasized that in this case, the students have played a major role in sustaining the theatre program. Thus, planning ahead, having co-champions, and enlisting student support all helped to minimize the impact of this loss.*

Teachers need ongoing and comprehensive training to successfully implement safe school programs. Without training and ongoing professional development, motivation

and enthusiasm can drop, and the program will suffer. As with student lessons, teacher training can use the same principles as programs, such as providing teachers with adequate information, opportunities to practise, and feedback on their work.

Using a professional learning communities approach can also help ensure the sustainability of safe schools programs. Research supports the nature and importance of a collaborative work culture within schools as necessary for school improvement. A few schools participating in our project use the Professional Learning Communities approach described by Dufour and Eaker in their book, *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (1998). Other schools use school improvement plans to establish a collaborative work culture within their school. Whatever the approach, research findings indicate that plans that allow teachers to work together and collaborate help to build capacity to implement and sustain programs.

Opportunity #3: Good communication

Good communication is the backbone to ensuring the ongoing success of any program. In general, the initial messages and language of the safe schools initiative come from the top and trickle down. They also come from any external resources that enter the school system to help set up the program. Conflicting messages—for example, promoting a safe environment but allowing students to wear clothing with violent or sexist messages— may be seen as hypocritical by both students and staff. In addition, regularly communicating the messages is helpful; people then see that the program is ongoing and still has the commitment of the various parts of the program team.

Good communication needs to exist between all levels—board, administrators, staff, students, parents, community members—and not just one level up or down. For example, students need to feel comfortable communicating to staff, administration, etc., so as not to risk being seen as "uncool" by their peers. Messages should be clear and succinct, delivering the maximum message in a minimum amount of time. Administrators have a lot of information to give to staff, and need to ensure that everyone hears, sees, and understands the same thing so that everyone is communicating the same message to all students.

One part of good communication is the use of a common language. If everyone, from the board to the students to the community, uses the same terms when referring to or promoting safe schools, it goes a long way in helping everyone understand what safe schools mean. Principals commented on the importance of using this common language, such as a statement of respect and responsibility or a motto, to address the challenge of sustaining a safe school environment.

> **Principals told us...**
>
> *It is the common language...If we can have everyone using the same language—recognize, refuse, report—the same language. That could be powerful.*
>
> *At Bayridge Secondary, we determined that violence prevention and the building of healthy relationships needed to be embedded in the school culture. Our school found that creating a sense of belonging can be a powerful tool to move the school forwards toward a positive climate. A common language and good communication are essential. A simple slogan such as "Bayridge ROCKS, Respect, Optimism, Courage, and Kindness" has worked well.*

Opportunity #4: Ministry/board priority and support

Ministry and school board support and commitment are crucial to any program's success. Principals emphasized the importance of support from the school board in assisting them to make safe school programs sustainable. They suggested that the school board should make safe school programs a priority, and that they should support these programs by providing personnel to assist with training and recommending appropriate resources.

> **One principal told us...**
>
> *When my superintendent comes in for a visit there's an item on the sheet that he brings in with him in terms of our progress with safe schools. And it's an expectation that during each school year you will bring a safe school team together and reflect on the initiatives that you had put in place for a school year and to make any amendments or identify maybe a different goal for the next school year.*

Once the program is seen as a priority, it should be easier to get commitment on the pieces needed to put it together: funding, staffing, training and professional development, and resources. Having the ministry and board set the priority gives the program more credibility within the community. Support may also be obtained from other organizations, such as educators' associations, communities, students, parents, teachers, administrators, boards of education, public health, sport and recreation organizations, community coalitions, local business, and municipal governments.

Opportunity #5: Embedding safe schools into the school curriculum and culture

Another way to help ensure program success is to make sure that the program and ideas are integrated into the school curriculum and culture. Embedding safe schools in the school curriculum ensures that students not involved in extra-curricular initiatives are also exposed to the issue.

A teacher told us...

Though we are aware that there are a number of students who are involved in leadership initiatives such as ESP and Trinity Theatre, it's important to note that not all students are involved in these initiatives. Not all students feel confident enough to go for programs such as this. So whatever we decide to do with regards to safe schools, I think it's important that we make it curriculum-based so that we reach all of our students. For example, make sure that we include it in the curriculum such as the Civics curriculum, the Drama curriculum, that way we reach the courses that all students have to take and this way all students are included.

In addition, the majority of administrators across Ontario who responded to the Ontario Principals' Council survey indicated that they would find assistance with embedding violence prevention programming into the curriculum somewhat or very valuable (93%).

In terms of embedding the programs into the school culture, it is important to recognize that the most effective programs are delivered over several years, with each year being tailored to specific development stages for the students. In addition, positive motivation is a better way to help the students learn, rather than the use of scare tactics. There are various ways to achieve this. For example, schools can implement a particular program such as:

• Forum Theatre – Drama workshop themes can include issues such as sexualities, drug use, and self-esteem, and provides students a safe space to explore issues that impact them and generate positive responses.

• The Fourth R – A comprehensive program that includes a curriculum-based approach to violence prevention and healthy relationship promotion.

• The Write Stuff – using writing to assist students to understand healthy relationships and safe school issues.

• Interdisciplinary Studies – "... helps students develop and consolidate the skills required for and knowledge of different subjects and disciplines to solve problems, make decisions, create personal meaning..."

Creating committees such as a Strong Respect Club, Be the Change Committee, etc., can also help incorporate safe schools into the school culture. In addition, repeating the school pledge every day and ensuring that "respect" is on every staff meeting agenda will help to create a safe schools culture. Another idea is to devote specific professional development to safe schools at the beginning of each year, or with each change in program team members. Finally, having older students communicate and work with younger students is a highly effective way of increasing the importance of the information about safe schools.

Successful programs have a skills building component. Simply providing instruction for skills or having students discuss the skills is unlikely to create, build upon, and improve skills and self-efficacy. It is critical to provide realistic opportunities for students to

practise the skills, and provide feedback to the students. These opportunities provide a vehicle for embedding safe schools into the school culture. In addition, students build self-confidence in their skills as they use them more.

Opportunity #6: Planning and step-by-step implementation

Incorporating planning and step-by-step implementation into a safe schools program is another way to help ensure sustainability. This process also ensures consistency. As one principal said, "The school has followed a carefully planned process of implementation." Almost all of the administrators across Ontario who responded to the Ontario Principals' Council survey indicated that they would find an inventory of available, effective programs somewhat or very valuable (99%). They also indicated that they would like assistance in identifying violence prevention programs that are developmentally appropriate for each grade level (97%). Having this information available would help schools with planning and ensuring step-by-step implementation.

Other suggestions include providing a continuum of information. For example, schools could start the planning process with the parents of grade 8 students who will be coming to the school the next year. Then the school could introduce grade 9 students and parents to the program, working slowly and developing a step-by-step implementation process with a careful selection of students. This process could be adapted as students go through the grades. Visiting other schools that have the program successfully in place can also be beneficial. However, it is important to ensure that the developed program goals are

appropriate and reasonable for the specific school, and are not merely a copy of another school's goals.

Opportunity #7: Celebrate success

Another aspect of safe school program implementation that facilitates the sustainability of the program is to share program successes, such as stories about individuals or groups involved in safe schools. This is opportunity is related to communication, as discussed in opportunity #3. Celebrating success also helps to keep people motivated. Some principals spoke specifically about this need to recognize and celebrate the success of a safe schools program. One principal put it succinctly, "When it works and you can use it as an example and build on it, then it will go." Others spoke of the positive effects on the students and staff when students' good behaviour is recognized and reported back to the school.

> **Principals told us...**
>
> *You need to celebrate and share the good things that are happening.*
>
> *I really believe in the importance of recognizing and celebrating even small successes—just as we celebrate cultural differences and student success, so we must acknowledge and celebrate our safe schools initiatives... this is what provides to us the glimmers of hope…The motivation to sustain our momentum.*

Conclusion

The Safe Schools Action Team (2006) states:

> *A school-based program stressing the importance of healthy relationships helps*
>
> *youth make safer choices, provides training in relationship skills, and promotes*

positive youth relationships in collaboration with parents, schools, and

communities (page 6).

It is important for administrators to become aware of the opportunities that will facilitate planning for and implementation of these school-based violence prevention programs, as well as ensure the sustainability of the programs. In addition, understanding the potential barriers to implementation and sustainability, and learning strategies to overcome these barriers, is crucial.

"Engaging alienated or unmotivated students, involving parents and the community at large, addressing social inclusion of special needs students...all are examples of current adaptive problems (i.e., challenges for which we do not have the answers)" (Fullan, 2005, P. 53). Implementing and sustaining safe schools strategies and programs are examples of this kind of challenge. It requires "the deep participation of the people with the problem" (Fullan, 2005, p.53). The next chapter will examine how to develop a framework for action to understand the change process, and facilitate implementation and sustainability of safe schools policies and programs.

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