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Healthy Souls: Our Journey Towards a Health Promoting High School

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the processes and resources needed to create a health promoting high school. Of specific interest were the experiences of a group of individuals (students, teachers, and university faculty) working to establish a health promoting high school. The voices of high school students, through the use of a survey and a school based health committee, provided insight into the needs of high school students and also the motivation and guidance to make health enhancing opportunities and choices available for students attending a high school in Saskatoon.

Using the Voices and Choices Model developed and supported by the Public Health Agency of Canada, this project moved through a seven step process. The first three steps involved gathering data and assembling a school health team. The final four steps involved a review of the results of a student health survey and the planning of actions related to the results of the survey. Numerous health enhancing actions were taken including the provision of healthier food options and the opportunity for more students in the school to be physically active.

The results of this study indicate that a group of committed students and teachers can work together to create a Health Promoting High School. The students involved in this project became leaders in their school and community and the school became a healthier place for staff and students!

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Introduction

What would a school look like that valued the health of students? What would it be like to be part of a school that understands that the health of students greatly impacts their academic achievements? Are there any schools like this? Is a school that supports and promotes student health a dream – or could it be a reality? A reality that just might be worth pursuing...

Almost everyday we are reminded that the health of young people is at risk. Low levels of activity, poor nutrition, climbing obesity rates, high stress levels and an array of other health detracting behaviours among young people make their current and future health status a concern (Gibbons & Naylor 2007; Must & Strauss, 1999; Raine, 2004). The school environment plays a critical role in the health behaviours of youth due to the amount of time students spend on school grounds and the opportunity teachers and schools have to positively impact knowledge and behaviours (Cale, 2002; McKenzie, 1999; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005). In addition, the connection between health and learning has been well documented. Numerous researchers have concluded that the health and well-being of children and youth is linked to their academic performance (Anderson & Stathakos, 2003). Thus, it is clear that schools not only have a key role to play in promoting health in their students, but that if students are healthy they can perform better academically.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized that the school is uniquely positioned to promote health. In the 1997 Jakarta Declaration, the WHO suggested that schools establish positive social and physical environments that respect and support all students so that they will be more likely to foster healthy development and experience both short- and long-term benefits, including improved learning, spirit and morale, attachment and engagement, reduced absenteeism, alienation and discipline problems. The WHO suggested that every child has the right, and should have the opportunity, to be educated in a school that promotes good health (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003).

The relationship between health, learning and the need to create environments that support the health of students are central components of the Health Promoting School model. The concept of a Health Promoting School is based on the Comprehensive School Health approach to health promotion. Comprehensive School Health uses a multifaceted approach that includes teaching health knowledge skills, creating a health enabling social and physical environment.

A Health Promoting School uses many strategies to not only influence individual health behaviours but also provide supportive environments in which students live and learn. There are four main elements in a Health Promoting School. These include:

- (1) Instruction in health, physical education, and other related classes;
- (2) Services that provide assistance to students and staff to help them make healthy choices;
- (3) A Supportive Social Environment that involves parents, students, teachers/school staff and others working towards increasing the health of students; and

- (4) A Healthy Physical Environment that is free from physical hazards, and unsafe conditions. (CAHPERD, 2008). Actions in these four areas are designed to positively enhance student's health and to improve the environment in which they live and learn.

It is clear that it is time to rethink school health programs away from kits and projects and use the school as an ongoing setting where health is created, supportive environments are built, partnerships are made and many skills are learned. While this vision is captured in the concept of a Health Promoting School, the steps and strategies needed to create such a school are relatively unknown. While many agencies in Canada advocate for the establishment of a Health Promoting School (CAHPERD, 2006; Public Health Agency of Canada), little research exists to determine if it is indeed possible to create such a school!

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the processes and resources needed to create a health promoting high school. Of specific interest were the experiences of a group of individuals (students, teachers, administrators and university faculty) working to establish a health promoting high school.

Three questions guided our work:

1. What are the health needs of high school students?
2. What resources and supports are needed to create a health promoting high school?
3. What factors positively or negatively influence the creation of a health promoting high school?



Research Design

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative approach to inquiry that offers participants opportunities to take systematic action to address the realities of their present situation. Action research provides researchers with the opportunity to focus on the positive because it offers a framework by which participants and researchers can work together for the common goal of positive change. Participatory Action Research is founded on the belief that people are knowledgeable about their intentions and actions and thus can take a “realistic approach” in changing their lives (Stringer, 1999).

Research using a participatory action approach acknowledges the importance of building trusting relationships, communication and inclusion. PAR is generally thought to involve a series of self-reflective cycles that include: planning to make a change, acting and observing the consequences of the change, reflecting on the processes and consequences and then re-planning, acting and observing and so on (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). While this process appears to be quite simplistic and linear, in reality it is dynamic, continuous and quite complex.

In our project the Health Canada program, “*Voices and Choices: Planning for School Health*,” was used to guide our actions. This action-research based program is designed to help schools determine health needs of their students, and offer strategies to act upon these needs. *Voices and Choices* is based on the principle that “health is a prerequisite for learning, and that healthy students, in safe, health promoting school communities, are ready to learn and learn more effectively than students who are ill, hungry, under stress, or chronically worried and pressured” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003, p. 4).

VOICES AND CHOICES: FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS

Voices and Choices uses two major works as sources for its foundational beliefs. The first is the World Health Organization (WHO), which defines health as “a resource for everyday life” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003, p. 1). Health is more than an absence of illness. It is influenced by life circumstances, beliefs, actions, culture, economics and physical environments. Various sources of stress can influence students’ health: physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual. The WHO has recognized that the school is uniquely positioned to promote health. The other major work that is used as a foundation is the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international treaty that describes the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children. It is the most comprehensive of all universal treaties with near universal ratification by countries of the world. Article 12 of the Convention states that “children should have a voice in all matters that affect them” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003, p. 2). This foundational belief resounds with the Freirean philosophy that students should be “humanized” by being able to dialogue with teachers. Rather than being another program produced for students by experts and theorists, *Voices and Choices* strives to listen to student voices through questionnaires, and then asks the students to carry out action research (praxis) in order to make the identified changes.

THE FIVE THEMES OR "PATHS" OF VOICES AND CHOICES

The *Voices and Choices* program has five important themes called the "Five Paths to School and Student Health and Well-being" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003, p. 9). The first path is the psycho-social environment (school climate). This path is based on the belief that a safe and supportive school climate is: free from discrimination, enhances self esteem, encourages cooperative caring, respectful behaviour, respects individual differences and cultural traditions, and fosters relationships and communication among everyone in the school. The actions of the people in the school (teachers, administrators and students) have either a positive or a negative effect on school climate.

The second path is the physical environment, which includes the air, noise, lighting conditions, and the quality of work and play spaces. School programs can be designed to improve the physical environment. Students may choose to initiate greening programs where they plant trees and shrubs on the school grounds, or to improve school air quality by removing moulds from the school or promoting scent-free environments.

Voices and Choices describes the third path, students' personal resources, as the students' perceptions of their ability to cope with changes and stress, and the sense of support they feel they have if they were to get in trouble. The school needs to find ways to build self-efficacy, and to teach coping strategies. Examples of practical school activities that may help students build personal resources include providing orientations for new students, setting up mentoring or peer helper programs, and making counselling services more accessible by enhancing the school connections to the services already available in the local community.

The fourth path is personal health practices. This path includes aspects of student behavior that affect health, such as physical activity, smoking, drinking, eating habits, sleep patterns, and use of medications and drugs. Much of this path can be, and often is, taught in health, lifestyles and physical education classes; however, there is growing concern about the effectiveness of this teaching as we still see an alarming rise in the incidence of lifestyle-related disease among our youth.

The final pathway that forms the basis of the *Voices and Choices* philosophy is support services, which the school can provide on its own or in collaboration with other community service agencies. Many support services are needed, such as counselling for personal, emotional, or learning difficulties; special support facilities or programs; extracurricular education on anger management, conflict resolution and stress management.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

There are eight guiding principles in the *Voices and Choices* program. The first principle states that "health is a prerequisite for learning" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003, p. 1). Students cannot learn if their basic health needs are not provided for. The second principle states that "a safe, health-promoting school is based on democratic principles" (p. 5). This democratic process offers the students an opportunity to have both power and control over an important part of their lives. The third principle emphasizes the importance of providing students with opportunities to make socially responsible changes to their world. The fourth principle recognizes that growing and developing students need a variety of supports and services, which should be designed to help students move safely through this stage of their lives while developing positive lifestyles and learning

healthy behaviours. The fifth principle describes the school's role of meeting the diverse needs of each student. Coping skills, health-related decision-making skills, and other risk-reducing instruction must be individualized for the many and varied groups (age groups, sexes, ethnic groups, academic levels) and individuals in school. The sixth principle recognizes the interdependency of the many factors that affect a student's health.

No one solution is ever effective on its own. All interventions must contain a number of components in order to maximize their effectiveness. The seventh principle describes schools adapting to the special features of their environments. Each school must adapt its programs to the special situations (cultural milieu and climate) present in the school. The final principle states that "safe, health-promoting schools support the development of a strong overall school policy" (p. 7). This comprehensive school health policy aids everyone in the school, from the students to the health and physical education teacher, to the guidance counsellor and administrators.

Methodology

PARTICIPANTS:

The School:

This project occurred during one school year at Evan Hardy Collegiate, a high school in Saskatoon located in close proximity to the University of Saskatchewan. Opened in 1965, Evan Hardy is home to the Evan Hardy “Souls”. Evan Hardy has a diverse multicultural student population and at the time of this study, approximately 1200 students attended this high school. In 2006, a new high school (Centennial Collegiate) opened on the east side of the city and currently the enrollment at Evan Hardy is approximately 850 students.

The motto of Evan Hardy is “excellence in all things” and the school has lived up to this goal! Evan Hardy has a tradition of academic excellence, each year approximately half of their student body achieves honour roll status. A full academic program is provided with classes offered at the regular, modified and enriched levels. Evan Hardy is home to a wide variety of Saskatoon Public School Division programs including: The International Student Program, The Media School Program, and the Autism/Asperger’s Program. The school has a history of extensive extra-curricular programming.

The Healthy Souls:

Approximately 25 students, three teachers and one vice-principal at Evan Hardy Collegiate were all members of the Healthy Souls team. This team worked together to promote and support the health of everyone at Evan Hardy.

PROCEDURES

The *Voices and Choices* program utilizes a practical implementation process which starts with gathering information and then follows a series of logical steps and principles. The *Voices and Choices* implementation process has seven chapters or stages. These stages include: Building Commitment; Establishing a Committee; Conducting a Needs Assessment; Interpreting the School Profile; Establishing Objectives; Program Action Plans; and Reviewing, Evaluating and Celebrating.

The following section will provides a description of how we used the *Voices and Choices* model in our study.

Voices and Choices: The Healthy Souls Way

STAGE ONE: BUILDING COMMITMENT

It is important to find a leader or champion for an initiative such as the creation of a Health Promoting High School. In our project, our champion was the vice principal, Mr. K. He was recognized as a leader in the school and the school division; and had experience using the Voices and Choices model. In addition, Mr. K. had an excellent relationship with the students and staff in the school. Before our project started it was important to seek support from many key people at Evan Hardy. A meeting was held with the principal and interested teachers to discuss the benefits of the program and the potential challenges that may accompany such an initiative. During this meeting it was made clear that Voices and Choices was a different type of program. It was emphasized that in the Voices and Choices model, students are encouraged to find their own solutions to the health problems that they feel are important to them. If the students experience Voices and Choices as just another program that tells them what their needs are and what they should do about their problems, then the program will fail as many before have done. The principal and superintendent enthusiastically supported this model. Applications were submitted to the Saskatoon Public School Division and the necessary documentation for ethical approval was submitted to the University of Saskatchewan. All applications were approved and the study began.

STAGE TWO: ESTABLISHING A SCHOOL HEALTH COMMITTEE

During this stage students, administrators, teachers, community organizations and institutions interested in the health of the students at Evan Hardy Collegiate were gathered together to form our school health committee. All of our committee members understood that we were entering into a reciprocal relationship, where everyone works towards meeting the students' identified needs. Our school health committee included: the champion (the vice principal), three teachers, approximately 25 students from Evan Hardy Collegiate and two professors from the University of Saskatchewan. The administration was represented by the champion and it should be noted that while the principal was not a member of our committee, he was very supportive of our work. The teachers involved in this project included physical education and science teachers. Selected students in grades 9 - 12 were invited by the champion and the participating teachers to join the school health committee. Every effort was made to ensure that the students represented the diverse student population at Evan Hardy. The teachers and champion looked for students with leadership abilities, an interest in making Evan Hardy an even better school and an interest in working as part of a team. The student representatives on our committee included everyone from the year book editor to the captain of the girl's soccer team! In addition to the students, and teachers, a professor from Kinesiology was part of the planning and implementation of the project and a professor from Nutrition was involved in many presentations and offered guidance in the area of healthy eating. The expertise of community organizations, such as Saskatoon in motion, the Saskatoon Health Region and the Heart and Stroke Foundation, was called upon when needed.

At our first meeting, it was decided that we would call ourselves *The Healthy Souls*. We felt this name accurately represented our goals and the school. A picture of the Healthy Souls is below.



STAGE THREE: CONDUCTING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The *Voices and Choices* survey tool was used to research the health needs of the students at Evan Hardy. Health Canada provided the survey and the data base. There are many advantages to using this survey: a large number of students can respond; the survey is very comprehensive (over 40 pages of carefully selected and validated questions); and it produced a large amount of data that could be cross-referenced between other schools in Canada. The importance of conducting a survey to determine the current health status of the students at Evan Hardy, and understand their needs, was communicated to the staff at a staff meeting. The staff agreed that this was an important initiative and the opportunity to participate in the *Voices and Choices* survey was given to students in grades 9 – 12 in selected required and optional classes (Ethical Living, Physical Education, Wellness 10, Computers, English). Parent consent and student assent forms were distributed and the students were asked to return the forms if they were interested in being involved. Every effort was made to involve a cross-section of students (grade, gender, academic program) in this phase of the study. With support from the central office of the Saskatoon School Division, the survey was loaded onto the computers in one of the computer labs at Evan Hardy and approximately 300 students completed the survey during class time. All of the student responses were confidential and students were asked to look only at their computer screens and remain seated during the survey.

STAGE FOUR: INTERPRET THE SCHOOL HEALTH PROFILE

All of the completed *Voices and Choices* surveys were sent electronically to Health Canada. The questionnaires were analyzed and we were provided with an extensive and interactive two-part report called the *School Health Profile*. The information returned to us filled a three-inch binder! The profile was organized into the five factors that can influence school and student health and well-being: Psycho Social Environment, Physical Environment, Personal Resources, Personal Health Behaviours, and Support Services. These influences are considered to be the five paths to school and student health and well being.

Part one of the *School Health Profile* focused on the grade and gender breakdown of the results from Evan Hardy, while part two was titled, "Selected Comparisons." The information provided in the comparison section of the school health profile gave our committee an opportunity to compare and research a wide-ranging amount of information from the school results and the national database, using the tables and charts to find unique problems in specific student groupings, or comparing areas of concern with national averages and with schools of both similar and different socio-economic profiles. It is important to note that this profile protects the privacy of the students and schools involved. Only the schools registered as participating schools have access to the data base. The data base does not name any of the schools involved but provides breakdowns based on school populations, gender, and grade. In our project, the information comparing Evan Hardy to other schools in Canada was reviewed by some members of the research team. However the majority of the members of our committee were much more interested in reviewing the results from the students at Evan Hardy than comparing Evan Hardy to other schools in Canada. However it is important to remember that in some schools, the comparisons that this part of the profile provides may help a school health committee generate strong arguments to take to the many in- and out-of-school groups and agencies for funding or help in developing programs for the needs uncovered by the survey. We felt we had the support we needed to work towards making Evan Hardy a Health Promoting School; we knew, however, that if we decided to involve more community partners, these comparisons could have assisted us in our work.

In the first month of our project three lunch hour meetings of the Healthy Souls were spent reviewing the information from the Evan Hardy School Profile. The majority of the committee members were overwhelmed at the amount of information provided by Health Canada. We decided to work in small groups and review separate sections of the Evan Hardy profile. Each small group was asked to identify the top three or four needs that were emerging in their review. This review gave us the opportunity to understand what the students at Evan Hardy were saying and prepared us to move to the next stage.

STAGE FIVE: CREATE SCHOOL HEALTH PLAN

To create our school health plan, we collected all of the information identified by each small group in our review of the school health profile, and prepared a "Healthy Souls list of ideas to make Evan Hardy a Healthier School." This list was distributed at a lunch hour meeting and committee members were asked to rank the items from one to ten. The review and ranking of the ideas resulted in the identification of three main areas in need of action: Physical Activity, Nutrition, and Mental Health. In addition to these three broad topic areas we also felt that it was essential that our plans and actions be well advertised and we felt that we needed to give information to help motivate students to take action to improve their health. The following is a list of the ideas we had to make Evan Hardy a healthier place. We were not able to accomplish all of these, but this is where we started.

1. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

- Have fitness classes available at lunch or before school.
- Add an opportunity to visit fitness facilities, community programs, and city facilities to the existing student activity pass.
- Have free weight room days at the start of each semester to increase student activity pass sales.
- Add low organized games to the regular intramural program.

- Organize and offer other activities around the school, such as the Terry Fox Run, Bike-a-thon, yoga, pilates, to help students remain active.
- Offer “learn to” classes for students who want to learn a new sport. This could help the non-team members feel like they can play a team sport on a recreational level.
- Make it easier for Evan Hardy students to connect with community teams, clubs and organizations so that they can get involved in sport and physical activity.
- Investigate offering physical education classes during lunch hours.
- Offer two streams of physical education: one for students who feel comfortable with sports (the traditional program) and one for students who are less confident in sports (a program with more emphasis on self- improvement).



2. NUTRITION

- Bring in speakers to assemblies and classes.
- Inform students through an advertising campaign about girls and dieting and how guys and girls gain weight.
- Work with Georgio’s (food service provider) and the Student Representative Council (SRC) to improve the food options available to students (e.g., brown bread, healthy wraps, fruit cups).
- Reduce unhealthy snack choices (vending machines, etc.); increase healthy choices (yogurt, fruits, vegetables).
- Reduce the selling of unhealthy foods for fundraising (e.g., donuts, chocolates).
- Order water bottles and promote drinking water from the tap.



3. MENTAL HEALTH

- Support and promote the work of the staff in Student Services.
- Offer teachers and students opportunities to get to know each other through physical activity and welcome week activities.

- Offer noon hour support (information) groups. Of particular need is information to help students cope with the stress around examinations.
- Stress the connection between physical and mental health.
- Promote healthy body images through posters, discussions, etc.
- Promote healthy ways to reduce stress.
- Create a safe environment with no room for bullying or abusive behaviours.

4. ADVERTISING AND AWARENESS

- Put a healthy tip of the day in daily notices.
- Create a poster campaign promoting Healthy Choices, around topics such as pop vs. water; dieting and nutrition; exercise; smoking; etc.
- Promote a walk, blade, bike to school campaign.
- Secure a bulletin board for advertising, information and posting interesting articles.



STAGE SIX: DEVELOP PROGRAM ACTION PLANS.

To move our plans to actions we divided our Healthy Souls group into four action teams. These action teams included: (1) Physical Activity; (2) Nutrition; (3) Mind, Body and Soul (mental health); and (4) Advertising. We decided that the entire Healthy Souls Committee would meet on the first and third Wednesday of every month and the action teams would meet on the second and fourth Wednesdays. This meant that there would be one meeting a week for everyone involved. We all felt that this would fit nicely into our schedule and we could use our time and energy better than meeting as a large group once a week.

Each action team was encouraged to use a six-step process to develop, implement, and evaluate at least one action plan for the year. This process included:

1. Identify the objective;
2. Brainstorm ways to achieve the objective;
3. Identify the resources needed;
4. Develop activities to address the objective;
5. Organize the launch of the action (in our model this responsibility often was taken on by the Advertising Committee); and
6. Evaluate the action.

This process helped the students understand their situation and their needs and gain an authentic insight into the factors that affect their health and well-being.

Using this process, the four action teams achieved the following actions during our year as the Healthy Souls.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Objective: Increase the activity options available for inactive students.

1. During the school year, innovative noon hour activities were introduced once a week through Fit Tuesdays. Fit Tuesdays were open to all students and staff and offered activities in strength training, circuit training and yoga. The most popular of these three was yoga, and this was the activity that was sustained throughout the year. Between 20-30 students and staff attended each Fit Tuesday activity.
2. Intramurals were promoted as a chance for all students to be active. Different levels of activity were offered and instruction was available if students wanted a bit more help.
3. In September, the Terry Fox run was done for the first time at the school. The run was promoted as an activity for all students, and the teachers and administration agreed to release all students to walk on the Terry Fox National School Walk Day.
4. A walk/jog club was introduced and promoted as a way to get fit without having to compete. Approximately 20 students joined the walk/jog club.
5. The weight room was opened for a “girls only” lunch hour and instruction was offered to the girls who needed it. Approximately 15 girls took advantage of the girls only environment.



NUTRITION

Objective: Give students knowledge and opportunities to make healthy choices.

1. Members of the nutrition committee had several meetings with food service staff. Through numerous consultations and discussions, healthy food choices were introduced. These included fruit and vegetable cups, brown bread and wraps, dried fruit and granola and fewer potato chips and chocolate bars.
2. Three smoothie sales occurred during the school year. These were a huge success with all of the smoothies selling out in record time every time we had a sale!

3. The choices available in the beverage machine with the glass front were changed to healthier options. The pop was replaced with water and sport drinks. The students felt that their peers liked to watch the beverage lifted from the machine and thus, more beverages would be sold from this machine than from the one that you could not see the drink land in the tray. They were right!
4. "Soul food" was sold to athletes after and before practices. Such food included yogurt, chocolate milk and veggie cups.



BODY, MIND AND SOUL

Objective: Provide students support and opportunities to achieve balance, reduce stress, and connect with staff and students.

1. The Kids Help phone number was placed in prominent places in the school.
2. Discussions occurred with the Student Services department about the need to offer information sessions for students dealing with healthy body image, coping with stress and time management.

ADVERTISING

Objective: To support, inform and promote healthy choices and the work of the Healthy Souls.

1. A bulletin board dedicated to the activities of the Healthy Souls was placed in the main hallway of the school
2. Daily notices included a healthy tip.
3. All nutrition and physical activity actions were promoted by the advertising action team.
4. Binder inserts with healthy tips were made and distributed.
5. The achievements of outstanding Evan Hardy students in sport and physical activity that may have gone unnoticed (due to the type of sport and activity) were promoted in a poster series.
6. Staff and students promoted Evan Hardy as the only health promoting high school in the Saskatoon Public School Division. This distinction appeared on their website and on assorted information about the school. The work of the Healthy Souls was displayed and promoted during the Grade 8 Open House.
7. The work of the Healthy Souls Committee was acknowledged by teachers, administration and their picture appeared in the annual year book.

STAGE SEVEN: REVIEWING, EVALUATING AND CELEBRATING

Due to the integral role that reflection and evaluation play in action research, our plans and actions were continually reviewed and evaluated. We identified the weaknesses and failures of our work, and celebrated the strengths and successes of our many actions. This process allowed us to learn from our mistakes and successes and make new action plans.

Halfway through the school year, the Healthy Souls Committee was invited to the College of Kinesiology for a half day mid-year evaluation workshop. The students

ate a healthy lunch, and spent time reviewing their plans and actions to date and identifying new ideas and actions. At the end of the day everyone was given an opportunity participate in Yoga, Pilates or Core Strength Training. This time away from school gave our team a chance to look at all we had accomplished and develop new goals. Committee members returned to Evan Hardy renewed and re-energized – and ready to continue our work for the last half of the school year.

All members of the Healthy Souls were invited to participate in group interviews at the conclusion of the school year. The students were interviewed in their action teams (Physical Activity, Nutrition, Body Mind and Soul and Advertising). Some of the staff joined in with the teams; others were interviewed alone. During these interviews the teachers and students were asked to reflect on the following questions:

1. Do you think we accomplished our objectives? Do you think we created a Health Promoting High School?
2. What were our greatest successes?
3. What were our biggest challenges?
4. Would you encourage other students to be involved in a health initiative like this?
5. How can the Healthy Souls be more effective next year?

The results of these year-end discussions indicated that while the students were proud of their accomplishments, they were aware that there was a lot more work to be done. An overarching theme in all of the discussions was the fact that students enjoyed being involved in this type of an initiative. They felt that their time was well spent and they wanted to continue being a member of the Healthy Souls:

Our health is a topic that a lot of us are interested in and we want to make our school a healthy place.

I kept hearing about how bad we are and I wanted to do something about it – and I think we did!

Several students were pleased that they were asked to participate in this initiative and for some of them it gave them an opportunity to be more involved in their school:

Mr. K. asked me, and it sounded like a good idea, so I joined. I am so glad I did.

I did not get elected to the SRC, and I still wanted to get involved in the school. Healthy Souls gave me a chance to be part of something positive at Evan Hardy. I am so glad I had a chance to belong to this!

When reflecting upon each action team's specific activities, we agreed that we experienced many success and challenges during our work. They are shared in the following section.

CELEBRATING OUR SUCCESSES

The students on the Nutrition Action Team could easily discuss their accomplishments:

I think we did a lot. I mean we worked with Georgio's and we got them to make some changes. I know it might not seem like a big deal, but having healthy choices like fruit cups and yogurt is way better than it was before. He said that maybe they only sell like fifteen to twenty a day which is different than selling a hundred cookies or whatever they sell but it's still making a difference and I think that people are making healthier decisions because of it.

When you compare our food to the food at almost any other school there is a lot more healthy stuff at our school, maybe not everything there is one hundred percent healthy but you know a lot of what's here is a lot more healthy than what is at other places and even things like cookies and baking are better than a chocolate bar. So you know, maybe it's not a huge difference but every little bit counts.

We have to keep teaching students and the people who sell food in our school. Why can't we just offer light cream cheese. Georgio told us that we have to tell people that it is light – why do we have to do that? Kids don't care and it tastes the same, we don't tell them that things aren't light. It just seems so simple, but it takes so much effort.

They still serve some things that are not good – but we have come a long way since the start of the year.

The Physical Activity Team were thrilled that their efforts had encouraged students who were not active at school to become more active:

Fit Tuesdays were great. I wish more people would have come, but overall it was pretty good. The people that showed up are the ones that are not usually in the gym at noon.

The all girls' weight room was a big success. Lots of those girls would have never come to the weight room if we had not given them a chance to do it without boys there.

This year we gave the kids that are not on the school teams a chance to do some activities. We were interested in the kids that were not involved in anything. We wanted to give them a chance to come to the gym and feel like they could participate.

The Advertising Team felt that everyone in the school knew about the Healthy Souls:

The bulletin boards and the announcements really worked. People took the recipes from the bulletin boards and they asked for more!

People knew about us that's for sure. They may not have come to all of the stuff that we planned but they knew that our school was different than last year!

We worked hard to be a part of everyone's stuff. We wanted to make sure that people knew about the great things that were being planned for them.

While the Mind Body and Soul action team had limited success, they felt that they had started some plans that they could put into action next year:

We had some good talks with people, and we know that there is a role for our committee. We just have to work harder at figuring out exactly what the students want and need. We have to work more with the Counsellors and maybe some Health workers that could help us.

THE CHALLENGES ARE MANY

While our project had many successes we experienced several challenges. These challenges cut across all aspects of our work; we learned from them, and we modified our plans and actions as we worked together to create a healthier school.

The first challenge we faced was in using the *Voices and Choices* tool. It took a great deal of time and effort to load the survey tool on the school's computers and we are very grateful for the support we received from the computer support staff of the Saskatoon Public School Division. The length of the survey proved to be a challenge since the day is divided into 60 minute blocks. Some students were able to finish the survey in one class period, but some students needed more time that we were not able to provide.

All of the students and staff involved in the Healthy Souls initiative were involved in other extracurricular activities. While these people gave everything they could to Healthy Souls, there were times when all of our team members could not attend our meetings. In addition, at the time of this study, the staff that was involved was not recognized as making a contribution to the extracurricular program at the school. Thus, they helped with the Healthy Souls on top of their other assigned duties. It is important that their efforts be acknowledged as their work has the potential to affect every student in the school!

Several of the students expressed frustration that their peers did not think it was important to care about their health; they felt that some students just don't care about their health:

"They think they are going to live forever and there is nothing we can do about it."

When comments like these were shared at our meetings we encouraged the students to focus on the number of students who were participating in the activities and choosing healthy food. Changing the behaviours of people takes a great deal of time and effort. We were only just beginning.

Several teachers told us that our work with the Healthy Souls exposed numerous shortcomings in the physical education and health curricula:

"We don't talk about nutrition in any of our classes, yet it is obvious that these kids are really interested in it."

A review of the grade nine health curriculum and the grade ten wellness curricula showed us that instruction in nutrition was indeed in both of these curricula, yet the students at Evan Hardy told us that they could not remember receiving instruction in nutrition in grade nine or grade ten. A physical education teacher made a humbling revelation when she realized that the most popular activity on Fun Fit Tuesday was yoga, and she had never taught yoga in her physical education classes. To make it worse she noted that the students who were coming to Fun Fit Tuesdays were the students who were not motivated to participate in phys-ed classes:

I was surprised at the people who came out – it was the people who don't really do much in phys-ed, but they kept showing up for Fit Tuesdays. It showed me that what I am teaching in phys-ed must not be that interesting to them. And all the time I thought they did not want to do anything – it turns out they don't want to do what I am teaching them.

Our work on the Healthy Souls initiative reminded us that change is difficult. Changing the way things have been done for years at a school takes patience and an understanding that change is a process, not an event. The struggles faced by the nutrition committee to change the food served by the food service company reminded us all that making healthy options available may enhance health, but such a change may also affect the profit of a private business. The nutrition

committee spent a great deal of time negotiating changes to the menu and their efforts were well received by staff and students – and did not result in the loss of revenue that was initially feared. Our efforts to offer students opportunities to participate in activities other than team sports resulted in some students feeling that they had lost their usual opportunity to be active. While this may have been the case, our work opened up the gymnasium and the weight room to students who had not previously felt they could participate in activities at lunch hours.

The Mind Body and Soul action team had some great ideas, but experienced some challenges in putting their plans into action. This difficulty may be due to a negative stigma attached to mental health or lack thereof. In addition, the idea of enhancing the mental health of students may require more support and partnerships than actions in the other areas. The mental health of high school students is an area that is in need of attention, and future efforts should be directed in this area.

Finally, while the *Voices and Choices* tool allowed us to determine the needs of the students at Evan Hardy, it did not provide us with an opportunity to gather baseline data on health behaviours such as physical activity and nutrition. Thus, we were not able to determine if our actions enhanced the physical activity and nutrition behaviours of students. We know that more students were active and we know that healthy choices were made available but we do not know if our actions positively changed the health of the students. In the future, a survey of activity levels, nutrition behaviours, and knowledge and attitudes towards physical activity and nutrition should be done before any changes are made to existing physical activity opportunities and food choices. This information would afford health teams an opportunity to determine if their actions positively impacted on the health of students.

Conclusion

We have learned through our work on this project that students are concerned about their health and the health of their peers, and they want to be involved in helping students make healthier choices. Students leading students is indeed a powerful model and a model that can effectively create and sustain a Health Promoting School. Several students told us that they joined the Healthy Souls as it gave them an opportunity to combine their interest in health with their desire to play a positive role in their school. The students were proud of their accomplishments and in a final interview many commented that if this was left up to the teachers they would have taken a much different approach:

We have a different mindset than what teachers have. If you would have told the teacher that they had to do what the Healthy Souls did this year, they would have made a handout and given it out to kids about healthy and we should try to be healthy. But having involved us, having us in there, the good thing was we knew what the problems of our generation are facing right now and we knew, we already knew. If teachers had to go and first ask kids about their problems, first of all there would have been the problem that the kids don't speak up. But we knew and we acted and that was awesome. And we can't forget that Mr. K. gave us a chance to be leaders – to do something about the health of kids.

It is important to note that all of the people involved in this project felt that an initiative like the Healthy Souls could take place in any school. Our work in this project has given many of the students an opportunity to tell students in other schools about their work. At a Saskatoon-in-Motion leadership conference, members of the Healthy Souls shared their stories and encouraged other high schools to make their schools healthier places. At the conclusion of this event a student said,

That was fun, it is great that we get to be leaders in our school and in the whole city! People need to know that our school is not that different from their schools. It is just that we got started earlier and we may be a bit more organized, but we were right where they are now just a year ago!

The principal echoed these comments and offered encouragement to other schools interested in a project like this one:

I don't think we're that unique. You need to have an awareness of, I think given what's out there in the media these days it's clear that there is a need in society to address the wellness of all youth so I think there are lots of people who want to champion that. Tap into those people to make sure you can do that. Of course, we have some champions here on staff and they go out and are getting students who are champions so I think every school has those people. In terms of some barriers that are out there, it's always the same barriers for every project you undertake, it's time, its energy, it's getting people's support – and you need to have a team.

An interesting outcome of our work to improve the health of the students at Evan Hardy was the effect of our initiative on the health of the staff at the school. After hearing of our plans to enhance the health of students, numerous staff members approached the champion (Mr. K.) and asked if staff wellness could be included in

the Healthy Souls initiative. The students and staff on the Healthy Souls Committee supported this wholeheartedly. Thus, staff were invited to participate in all of the Healthy Souls initiatives and together with a small group of teachers, our champion (also the vice principal) identified ideas that could enhance the wellness of staff. As a result, the staff made many changes to their daily work at the school. They had healthier food options at staff meetings, they began to introduce wellness options to professional development days and they searched for ways to decrease the time spent sitting in meetings. While staff health and wellness was not a focus of our project, a true Health Promoting School should be filled with staff and teachers who value their own health. This unexpected outcome was one of the many positive features of the Healthy Souls.

As members of the Healthy Souls we learned that through hard work, cooperation and support for each other and our goals, it was possible to create a Health Promoting High School! Many students reported that their school feels different now: *"There's a feel, there's a culture, you know we are a good place to be, a healthy place."*

All of us involved in this project hope that our work today will lead to a healthier future for all of the students and staff at Evan Hardy. Sarah, one of our "healthy souls," says it best:

We are teenagers right now and this is our time to learn and what we learn today we will practice for the rest of our lives. So right now if you are impacting one generation you probably are. When we go on and have our kids, we will impact them. We will tell them to make healthy choices so this is not just a one time thing, it goes on with us. We did this for one year, we tried, and we did the best we can. I believe we started something new this year that's going to go on forever.

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