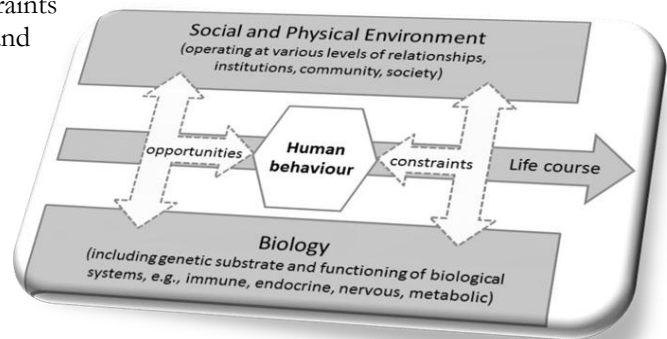


Comprehensive School Health

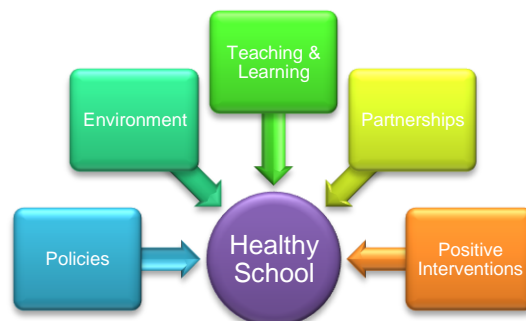
Comprehensive school health is an ecological approach to promoting education and student wellbeing. It helps us step back and look at the whole picture or the “ecosystem” in which students function. It suggests that a range of influences, from personal characteristics to broad social factors, shape student behaviours, including behaviours related to substance use. It means every student—indeed, every human being—is influenced by a unique set of opportunities and constraints shaped by a complex interaction of biological, social and environmental factors that play out over a life course (Glass & McAtee, 2006; Mallick & Watts, 2007). Therefore, multiple questions must be explored from different angles in order to make decisions that truly promote the education and wellbeing of every student in a school community, including those who are challenging to work with or seem at risk of substance use problems down the road.



An easy way to understand this idea is to imagine a school community’s ecosystem as a frog pond. If some of the frogs in the pond started behaving strangely, our first reaction would not be to punish them or even to treat them. Instinctively, we'd wonder what was going on in the pond. We need to take this same ecological approach when considering school health.

A comprehensive school health approach will seek to nurture a variety of protective factors that help build resilient individuals who are able to bounce back from adversity. However, comprehensive school health programs do not focus simply on "fixing" students; they aim to change the school environment and actively engage students in the learning process. For instance, rather than relying solely on a drug education program to teach children how to make healthy choices, the whole-school approach encourages the school itself—its structures, policies, procedures and staff—to operate in a healthy way and thereby both model and promote “health.”

There is no magic formula for creating a healthy community. There is no one-size-fits-all approach that can simply be replicated in every school. Nonetheless, there are promising practices that cluster in five critical areas as represented in the figure. The “promising practice series” will explore these various practices, their theoretical underpinnings and supporting evidence, and offer practical guidance on implementing them in the school setting.



A Quick Summary of Current Evidence

Education and health are interdependent. Studies worldwide have demonstrated that the health of students and teachers as well as the environment in which they operate impact academic performance, teacher morale and absenteeism. This led to the concept of the health-promoting school as "one that constantly strengthens its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working" (World Health Organization, 2014).

While most of the research on health initiatives in schools has focused on single components such as curriculum, a growing body of evidence suggests that combined strategies produce better results (Stewart-Brown, 2006). In fact, school communities should focus on changing the culture of the school to encourage greater school attachment and involvement, both of which have been shown to reduce alienation not only from the school but also from the dominant values of the larger society (Tobler et al., 2000; West, 2006). A large US study found that the most important factors in reducing risk behaviours were students feeling connected to their school community and to caring adults within it (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). This has been replicated in other studies in other countries (Markham, Young, Sweeting, West, & Aveyard, 2012). In particular, whole-school approaches have emerged as being among the most promising school-based programs to reduce the harms related to substance use (Peters, Kok, Ten Dam, Buijs, & Paulussen, 2009; Wells, Barlow, & Stewart-Brown, 2003).

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