

Positive Learning Environments in Schools A Pan-Canadian Consensus Statement

Introduction

On June 25-26, 2000, individuals from over thirty education, justice and community organizations met in Ottawa to develop a consensus statement on how schools can work with communities to prevent crime and violence. The purpose of this statement is to raise awareness and to facilitate the development of partnerships that will lead to safer schools and safer communities.

The individuals who attended that Ottawa meeting ask that national and provincial/territorial organizations consider endorsing this statement or developing their own statement to express their support for principled and collaborative approaches to promoting positive learning environments in schools. They also ask government departments and local authorities to consider the contents of this statement in adopting and implementing their respective policies and programs.

Note: This is a short form of this consensus statement. Please go to the following website for a longer version that includes links to the research evidence documents available online to support this statement. www.safehealthyschools.org/positivelearning.htm

The following organizations have endorsed this consensus statement:

- Canadian Association of Principals
- Canadian Home & School Federation
- Canadian Safe Schools Network
- Canadian Counselling Association
- Public Legal Education Association
- Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance
- Canadian Association for School Health
- John Howard Society of Canada

Positive Learning Environments in Schools

Preamble

- Recognizing that all children and youth deserve a safe, respectful, caring and positive learning environment:
- Recognizing that schools are a nearly universal setting where children and youth meet daily:
- Recognizing that schools are part of their communities and that community members participate and contribute to the environments within schools:
- Recognizing that Canadians are expressing immediate concerns about issues such as teasing, bullying, racism, harassment and other forms of violence:

This statement has been developed from the premise that research, professional judgment and practical experience all show that fostering healthy social development in children, youth and all community members is an effective approach to address these issues.

Benefits of Positive Learning Environments in Schools

Positive learning environments in schools will:

- maximize the learning of every student
- help children and youth become full participating citizens of society
- help to build a sense of community
- lead to cost savings and economic benefits because prevention is less expensive than incarceration

A Shared Vision about Positive Learning Environments

The adherents to this statement believe that participating in and contributing to a safe, respectful and positive learning environment is both the right and responsibility of children and youth, their parents/caregivers, school personnel and all community members. Schools, acting in partnership with their communities, can create and maintain these environments that foster a sense of belonging, enhance the joy of learning, honour diversity and promote respectful, responsible and caring relationships.

Supporting the healthy development of young people is the focus of many in society. Those engaged in such work should share common principles in how they work with children and youth. Positive learning environments can be built on these shared principles:

- A positive learning environment is inclusive, respectful and caring of all of its members.
- Education and the development of children and youth are the primary focus of schools.
- An inclusive curriculum, recognizing diversity and promoting respect, is needed to help students to resolve conflicts peacefully, learn about the law and acquire social and decision-making skills that enable them to contribute to the safety of their schools and communities.
- Fair and consistently implemented school policies and codes of behaviour contribute to positive environments and reduce racism, bullying and other forms of harassment.
- Decisions are guided by a problem solving, not punitive, approach as well as by supporting and enabling all members of the community to participate and contribute.
- Every member of the learning environment is entitled to natural justice; including due process that is fair, non-biased, proportionate, subject to appeal and that provides the reasons for the consequences.
- Three levels of action are effective in maintaining positive learning environments. Prevention of all forms of violence should be universal, involving all members of the community. When intervention is requested, it should be progressive, constructive, supportive and transparent. Follow-up services should be utilized to ensure rehabilitation and to help victims recover from critical incidents and crises.
- Allocations of support to individuals are guided by individual needs and are a shared responsibility of schools and community agencies.
- Leadership training and professional development, including knowledge of systems change, is provided through long term development programs.
- The school is provided with adequate tools and resources such as an integrated curriculum, materials and staff.
- Pro-social leadership is the responsibility of all adults in the school and the community.
- Youth are directly involved and have their own voice in the process.
- The effort to maintain a positive learning environment is integrated into all aspects of the school.

The school's response to crime and violence needs to be part of a community-wide effort. Actions can be taken within the school by school staff, parents and students. As well agencies and individuals within the community that work with schools can provide services and programs. These include police, health and social services personnel, community agencies, recreation workers, religious institutions, municipalities and the community at large. The roles of these partners will vary from community to community. However, these roles should be developed and agreed to by all of the local partners.

The Evidence Supporting Action In and With Schools

Research and the experiences of countless community workers, parents, youth and professionals have identified several promising practices that schools, working in partnerships with their communities, can use to promote positive learning environments.

Community and School Cooperation

Multiple coordinated programs and services using the schools as a hub and implemented by a variety of agencies, organizations and schools can lead to significant reductions in the numbers of antisocial behaviours. Specific partnerships such as those between police and schools or between schools and community-based organizations can lead to targeted improvements. Programs and approaches that involve the whole school in a coordinated set of strategies, programs, services and activities can reduce bullying and harassment, improve attendance, reduce the number of negative incidents and conflicts, increase student attachment to the school (preventing dropouts) and prevent gangs.

Youth Engagement

Engaging youth in crime prevention efforts within the school and the community can reduce antisocial behaviours. These participatory programs occur in a variety of forms, including after school programs, peer mediation, peer helper and peer leader programs, community service learning, extracurricular sports, recreation, adventure and arts programs, school watch, teen court programs, and reaching out to at risk or out of the mainstream youth.

Instruction and Informal Learning

Classroom and informal instructional programs can build pro-social knowledge, skills and attitudes/beliefs among youth. Evaluations have shown that such programs can enhance general social and decision-making skills, improve basic academic skills and school success, help to reduce stress and manage anger, develop conflict resolution skills, prevent specific forms of violence, increase knowledge and respect for the law/consequences, increase youth involvement in the community and reduce discrimination based on race, religion, culture, sexual orientation or gender, prevent alcohol and drug abuse, develop responsibility and character and enhance media literacy skills to reduce the impact of media violence.

Positive Behavioural Expectations

Comprehensive school, parent and community attempts to promote a positive, caring environment can be coupled with fair and consistently implemented school conduct/discipline policies to reduce the number and severity of antisocial behaviours. Clearly stated, meaningful and appropriate consequences to each infraction, wide school support for their implementation, with due process and appeal as well as links to alternatives to suspension/expulsion, restorative justice approaches and individualized behaviour expectations/plans, are effective in responding to incidents. Effective classroom management and teaching, regrouping of students for instruction (including alternative classes and schools) and creating sub-units within large schools can all contribute positively to the school's social climate.

Parent and Community Support

Parents and other adults can be mobilized to support positive changes among youth and the community. Parents/guardians can be informed by the school about their child, become involved with the school and can be supported or trained by agencies through contacts initiated by the school and others. Adults, working and volunteering in the school or in the community can act as mentors and advocates for youth.

Appropriate Safety Precautions

Well designed school buildings and facilities, appropriate use of specialized equipment, lighting and other appropriate precautions can make school sites more secure and safe.

Police, Social Service, Health, Housing and Employment Services

A range of health, employment, social and counseling support services to families, youth and schools can decrease violence, help victims and help offending youth to restore their place in the school and the community. Health professionals and agencies, social service agencies, child welfare authorities, the police, employment and training institutions, housing authorities, the courts and other mandated public services can develop interagency plans that will make a difference. Coordinated case management and appropriate sharing of information can improve the young person's chances of success. Prepared responses to critical incidents, with appropriate supports to victims, their families and the school community can reduce the trauma related to serious incidents. Specialized support to youth with disorders and emotional disturbances can be effective, as can coordinated support for rehabilitation and re-integration of young offenders.