

# **The Interaction of Health Agencies and British Columbia's Education System Facilitated by The Network of Healthy Schools**

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*Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC) is attributed with the saying,  
"Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all."*

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the potential for members of British Columbia's Healthy Schools Network (HSN) to shift beyond educational institutions and embrace non-educational organizations, such as public health and community agencies into the educational community, enabling schools to develop holistic approaches to positive mental health, overall well-being, and the academic needs of students.

Recognized as a pioneer in the development of the healthy schools movement, the World Health Organization defines a healthy school as "one that is consistently strengthening its capacity to be a healthy setting for living, learning and working." This paper explores the proactive ways that schools and community partners are interacting to meet this definition of a healthy school. It describes the collaborations and programs that have been developed to support learners, including programs such as a community garden, the Farm to School program, empowerment groups for girls and in-school counseling.

This paper focuses on Thornhill Elementary, a school in Terrace British Columbia (BC), and how they connected recent research to action by involving community agencies to enhance the learning experiences and emotional wellbeing of students and increase the capacity for school connectedness.

## **DASH BC and the Healthy Schools Network**

The HSN is an initiative of DASH BC, which aims to promote school-wide health goals and improve student learning related to healthy living topics. DASH BC is a not-for-profit organization committed to promoting healthy schools throughout British Columbia. DASH BC works with partners and stakeholders in both the health and education sectors as well as a broader community to promote, support and facilitate healthy schools.

Each year, members of the HSN commit to a yearlong cycle of learning that includes:

- a) forming a healthy school team that completes the healthy school assessment tool
- b) using the results of the healthy school assessment tool to develop a school inquiry question
- c) participating in the Healthy Schools Network regional meetings
- d) sharing their learning with a partner school
- e) completing the inquiry and analyzing inquiry results in a year end case study report to determine success or reflect on its capacity to be a healthy school setting.

The HSN itself is a member of the Networks of Inquiry and Innovation (NOII); a network created by Dr. Judy Halbert and Dr. Linda Kaser, which encourages educators to identify questions about their own practice and seek to answer them. Together these networks value a commitment to the development of leadership that encourages school communities to embrace comprehensive school health; an interconnectedness and shared responsibility between students, families, schools, communities and the province when creating healthy schools.

### **Thornhill Elementary School**

Thornhill Elementary is a member of the HSN, and as such aims to promote school-wide health goals and improves student learning related to healthy living topics.

Thornhill Elementary, a small school located in a semi-rural location in northwestern BC, has been struggling to increase community engagement and improve the overall physical, social and emotional health of vulnerable learners. Thornhill Elementary has a significant Aboriginal population and accommodates many transient students who live in lower socio-economic situations. Over twenty-five percent of students are identified as needing individual education plans that address specific learning needs, and a large number of the students are in foster care.

With the support of both the HSN and the NOII, Thornhill Elementary school is engaging in the cycle of inquiry. School community members in Terrace examine these inquiries:

1. To what extent do we need to merge our focus of academic based learning with a focus on social-emotional learning to create a sense of school connectedness and belonging?
2. To what extent do public elementary schools depend on interagency support to fulfill the needs of students and families in their learning communities, particularly in the area of social-emotional well-being?

Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond (2011) states that countries focused on developing “strategies for schools to share successful practices through networks, creat[e] an engine for ongoing improvement for the system as a whole” (p. 6). Thornhill Elementary shares many characteristics of global school communities attempting to engage vulnerable learners, including a significant Aboriginal population, transient students living in low-income situations, and a student body in which twenty-five percent of students require individual education plans.

The HSN has incorporated the province’s Social Responsibility Performance Standards into its’ guidelines and like many schools around the province Thornhill Elementary incorporates social-emotional learning into its daily curriculum through programs such as MindUp and FRIENDS. Daniel Goleman and Linda Lanlieri (2008) state “these programs add to the regular school day a curriculum for handling life: improving self-awareness and confidence, managing disturbing emotions and impulses, increasing empathy and cooperation” (p. 3).

Staff members at Thornhill Elementary are mindful of the need to improve students’ self-concept and self-regulatory behaviors. Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl (2008) states,

“Increasingly, school-age children are at risk for psychological and behavioral problems which affect personal relationships, school performance, and their future role as citizens” (p. 2).

## **Building Community Partnerships**

Thornhill Elementary has been searching for collaboration with community and government organizations for over five years and is slowly building capacity and a shared sense of ownership in the decision making at the school. The school is also making a concentrated effort to work closely with families when planning and adopting initiatives, including holding parent advisory council meetings alternately at the school and at the Kitselas' Band Health Unit to allow for greater parent participation.

Thornhill Elementary has partnered with ACEbc, an association dedicated to fostering and promoting Community Education and Community Schools in BC. ACEbc supports Thornhill by coordinating and integrating services from public and non-profit societies in the school building. The collaboration between ACEbc, DASH BC and the school enables Thornhill Elementary to move closer towards realising its goal of being a full service school.

The Kalum Community School Society is a member of ACEbc that has been active in the community for many years. The Kalum Community School Society is a volunteer board made up of a group of educators, social service workers, and employees of non-profit organizations. Most importantly, they are a group of devoted community experts focused on ensuring that the school is the center of the community. At Thornhill Elementary, the Kalum Community School Society coordinates programs that are funded by the Ministry of Education through the CommunityLINK (Learning Includes Nutrition and Knowledge) program.

With the support of the Kalum Community School Society, Thornhill Elementary is able to explore mental and physical health issues within the context of the students' daily needs. Both the school and Kalum Community School Society are offering after-school programming within school buildings, during the hours in which vulnerable students are most frequently left unattended. Additional funding from the Ministry of Education is targeted towards programs such as breakfast and lunch meals, inner city and community school programs and school based support workers. As well, counseling is funded for at-risk children and youth.

Although not offered at Thornhill Elementary, the Kalum Community School Society offered breakfast programs to two other schools in the community. These programs decreased the number of late arrivals or absences while also addressing nutritional needs. Adults accompany the students to school and they eat breakfast together. The adults are then involved in food safe training, which enables them to be volunteers in the lunch program that delivers bagged lunches to schools with hungry children, including Thornhill Elementary. This lunch program allows the adults to participate with dignity, knowing that they are helping to feed the children, while at the same time receiving support themselves. Coordinators from the Kalum Community School Society work closely with the parents, preparing lunches and initiating conversations around nutrition and child care matters. This program is developing the kinds of trust remarked upon by Kaser and Halbert (2009) in *Leadership Mindsets*: “[f]or civic engagement to work, strong social ties and high levels of interpersonal trust at the community level are required” (p. 47). At-risk families are benefitting by the creating of connections in positive ways. In Chapter 11 of *The Nature of Learning*, Schneider, Keesler, and Morlock (2010) state:

Schools need to function not only as a venue for formal academic learning, but also to provide many of the supplementary services that are traditionally the province of families. These initiatives include free lunch and breakfast programmes, which help to reduce nutritional deficits that are also linked to lower concentration levels. (p. 266)

### **Farm to School Program**

In an effort to fulfill a vision of finding creative ways to provide healthy food for kids who couldn't otherwise afford these food choices, school and community members initiated the Farm to School Salad Bar program at Thornhill Elementary. Through this program, students can purchase salad bar tickets for a nominal amount, and school staff assures that the food is available equitably. Students learn to prepare and eat healthy foods that would not normally be offered in their homes.

The Salad Bar was built as a cross-agency effort under the guidance of the principal, teaching staff members, and a community nutritionist. Together the school, the Public Health Unit and the maintenance department of the school board, participated in a process of consultation that resulted in a grant for the construction of the Salad Bar.

Participating in the vision and creation of the Farm to School Salad Bar created an opportunity for staff members to develop greater social and emotional competence and created an immense feeling of pride for school staff members. Staff members learned how to set and achieve goals and how to persist and be resilient in the face of challenges, which assisted their efforts to sustain the original vision of the program. This experience had the effect of what Kaser and Halbert (2009) described as “reducing the isolation of teachers and creating conditions where adults are learning, growing and stretching themselves as professionals (which) is central to the work of learning-oriented design (p.114).

Students participated in the running of the Salad Bar by engaging in menu discussions, participating in food preparation, service and clean up. The Kalum Community School Society provides a coordinator to manage the Salad Bar two days a week and to help facilitate student leadership. Further, the Salad Bar welcomes parental involvement and provides an opportunity for parents to contribute to the school environment.

The staff and students at Thornhill Elementary also made commitments to healthy eating that go beyond the Farm to School program. For example, the school participates in B.C.'s School Fruit and Vegetable Nutritional Program which delivers fruits and vegetables to the school approximately every three weeks. The school also had a milk program sponsored by local producer Dairyland that provided milk at a very reasonable cost to students. All juice and pop machines were removed from the building in order to meet the Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in B.C. Schools. There is a concentrated effort to promote healthy eating through modeling and the guided, purposeful offering of healthy alternatives.

### **Community Garden Program**

In addition to the Salad Bar, teachers at the school initiated the development of the Thornhill School Community Garden with involvement from community members and employees of the Coast Mountains School District. Under the guidance of the Kalum Community School

Society, members of the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC), administrators, members of the First Nation Educations Staff, the Kitimat-Stikine Regional District Council and the Terrace Anti-poverty Food Garden all contributed towards the creation of the garden.

Many organizations and people came together and assisted in the funding and creation of Thornhill School Community Garden. The neighboring Junior Secondary School students built the raised beds and planter boxes for the garden, and students from Caledonia Secondary School built the garden shed. A parent (who was one of the initial advocates of the project) planned the garden, determining where the raised beds were to be placed.

The goals of the community garden project were to produce fresh, local food to enhance the school's Salad Bar, to link the garden to the K-7 school curriculum and to build community by having a number of agencies become partners in the project. Everyone involved with the garden is focused on reducing student hunger and the disruptive behaviours associated with hunger, thereby increasing students' ability to learn. Since its inception in August of 2009, there has been no record of vandalism of any kind to the garden. This project fits the premise of Furco's (2010) definition of academic service learning (2010):

projects are purposefully community-focused and community-based, are usually conducted in partnership with members of the community, and, most importantly, are designed with a community need in mind. In essence...the community becomes a resource for learning whereby the environs outside the school offer students authentic learning opportunities to use their academic knowledge and skills to construct and implement solutions to real-life social problems in the local community or broader society. (p. 229)

The garden is used as an outside classroom and students are taught how to participate in growing local foods. In the late spring and early fall, students plant and harvest vegetables and herbs in the community garden which is located on the school grounds. For the first six weeks of the school year, students enjoyed a variety of vegetables that included potatoes, onions, carrots, and kale. As well they grow flowers and herbs that enabled them to make balms for chapped lips and cough candies for the upcoming cold season. Students who were not previously achieving academic success are now working in an alternative outdoor learning environment with great success.

The students' contribution is further recognized when the product of their labour is shared with the rest of the school community. The Kalum Community School Society ensures that produce is distributed over the summer months through the FoodShare distribution system, thereby extending the reach of the project to help meet local food needs outside of the school.

Setting the long term goals of the garden are admirable: build a volunteer base, improve usage of food in a community food system, reduce hunger, increase availability of fresh vegetables to low income families and build positive relationships between the school, neighborhood, First Nations agencies and government agencies.

### **Building Capacity in the Community**

In the Fall of 2011, Thornhill Elementary received a further IMAGINE grant from Healthy Eating and Active Living in Northern BC (Northern Health ) that allowed students to participate

in the preparation of healthy foods for eating. The Thornhill Elementary PAC established a link with the local aboriginal community by moving the meetings into their community. PAC members travel to their First Nations community to share in the gathering and harvesting of traditional foods such as wild celery, asparagus and fiddleheads. They ask their Aboriginal community to help them identify and prepare these foods and link these activities to local First Nations' legends to help facilitate an understanding of how to "be" with nature. During the winter months, students in the elementary schools invite members of the community into the school to help focus parent and guardian attention on the simplicity of preparing food, rather than purchasing prepared food.

In addition to food programs within the school, one of the coordinators with the Kalum Community School Society has a passionate vision of a community with no hunger. The school's families, among others, have largely benefitted from the food recovery program of local grocery store Save on Foods, and its' fruit registry program. Food nearing its expiration date is taken to the Ksan Place and to shelters for community use. The coordinator has been responsible for delivering almost 60,000 kilograms of food to the community.

### **Building Connectedness and Emotional and Social Learning**

Thornhill Elementary has several programs in place to support Aboriginal students and foster a sense of connectedness between the school and the local First Nations community. A First Nations role model works in the building once a week and there are two male First Nations Student Support Workers in the building full time. The First Nations cultural room is open before school for homework completion, with Support Workers available to help students. At noon, the First Nations Support Workers sponsor a cultural arts program, where students learn about traditional art techniques and create beautiful Aboriginal art pieces which are proudly shared.

Thornhill Elementary, as well as two other schools, also participates in the Grrl Group, a thirteen week after school program modeled after an American girls' empowerment program. This program led by a counselor employed by Ksan Building Society and offered to groups of approximately twenty female students, discuss sexual activity, how to handle issues with adults and peers and alcohol, drug and cell phone/texting abuse. The program's intent is to foster a sense of resiliency and empowerment in students living in homes that do not provide these kinds of support. The girls are able to discuss issues openly and questions are answered honestly. The school supports the program by providing space where the sessions can be held without disruption, providing transportation home if necessary, and by acknowledging with the students the importance of being able to host the program within the building. Communications between the program and home are written and sent by the school administrator.

A second program was introduced in January called Safe Dating, which is offered during class time and aims to provide emotional resiliency for students and provide them with skills and strategies that enables them to make wise decisions. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl and Shelley Hymel (2007) have expressed the importance of "the need to extend our focus in school beyond educating just the minds of our children to educating their hearts as well" (p.20).

The coordinators employed by the Kalum Community Schools Society also support the

implementation of provincially developed parent education programs such as POPS (Parents of Primary Students), PALS (Parents as Literacy Supports), and MILE (Meaningful Intermediate Learning Experiences). The coordinators support educators during informational meetings at the school, and also support families by providing van transportation for those who would otherwise find it difficult to participate in family activities.

The coordinators were employed year round and run three sets of two week summer camps for twenty students identified by the school. During these camps, the coordinators partnered with workers from the Kermode Friendship Society to increase the adult to student ratio. Poon et al. (2011) in the report *Making the right connections: Promoting positive mental health among BC youth*, found that “when other protective factors were taken into account, family connectedness and school connectedness were the most consistently associated with positive mental health” (p. 5). Employing some of the First Nations School Support Workers in these programs helped the students maintain a strong connection to the school over the summer months. A strong bond formed between the First Nations School Support workers at Thornhill Elementary and the students that attended the summer programs, supporting the finding that “having an adult they can confide in about their problems is linked to better mental health outcomes for even the most vulnerable youth” (Poon et al., p. 5).

The Kalum Community School Society also offers a fourteen-week Strengthening Families program, similar to one that was developed in Utah, USA. It is meant for families at a medium level of risk – the rationale being that high-risk families may not benefit to the same degree. Each session starts with dinner table conversations before breaking into groups. Parents and children are broken into separate groups and given the same topic to discuss, before coming back together to talk about developing skills and strategies. The importance of strengthening families is stressed by Poon et al. (2011), in that “...the more connected youth felt to family or school, the more likely they were to report excellent general health and higher self-esteem” (pg. 5). Schools are encouraged by Schneider, Keesler and Morlock (2010) to “proactively and systematically identify families who are not yet involved in their children’s schooling and extend to them personalized invitations to become involved” (p. 265).

Another program aimed at increasing the emotional health of students is the counseling offered by the Ksan House Society through its association with the Kalum Community School Society. The counselling is provided for at risk students within the school building during school hours. Decreased absenteeism at the school ensures students receive regular counseling. Within *“Making the right connections: Promoting positive mental health among BC youth”*, youth have suggested to “reduce the barriers to accessing mental health support and ensure counselors are easily accessible” and “ensure youth have an adult support in their lives” (Poon et al., pg. 12). The Coast Mountains School District also provides a half-time counselor within the school building to help ensure social and emotional well-being. In addition, the counselor works with teachers to create understanding and to develop ways of handling difficult situations.

School staff are implementing locally and provincially developed programs into the curriculum to develop understandings of students’ diverse learning needs to foster trust, tolerance, co-operation and empathy. They are working with programs such as the Canuck’s Autism Program “I Can”, that empowers families living with autism throughout the province, and through the Friends for Life Program that teaches students and families’ resiliency in dealing with worrying situations.

In addition, members of the Coast Mountains School District and the regional NOII are working to offer a book club in January to parents in the district titled *7 keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read it and Get It*, 2003, by Susan Zimmermann and Christy Hutchins, that will help them understand the metacognitive strategies being taught in classrooms.

## **Healthy Living through Physical Activity**

Like many schools in BC, Thornhill Elementary honours the visions of the HSN by participating as a whole group, staff included, in Daily Physical Activity (DPA). Students and staff meet to participate in activities to raise their heart rate and improve flexibility and endurance. The HSN (2011) report describes examples of healthy inquiry questions created in BC schools, such as: "The buddy DPA system allowed for students to build relationships with each other and connect on levels outside of their buddy DPA time" (p. 3). This statement helps to explain the long lasting positive results for students.

Another program contributing to the physical and mental health of students at Thornhill elementary is a leadership program in which students in grades six and seven supervise games and activities for younger students in the gymnasium. The student leaders self-evaluate according to participation rates and feedback received from the student body. Younger students are also part of the leadership team which helps create sustainability, thereby fostering a depth of understanding for students through shared learning opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

As members of the HSN, Thornhill Elementary partnered with Kalum Community Schools Society, DASH BC and others to create a community of learners working together to encourage healthy eating, personal safety, physical activity and programs that support learning and social-emotional well-being. Dr. Kaser and Dr. Halbert, through the NOII, propose that every student in each of BC's schools is able to answer the question, "Are there two adults in your building that care for you?" At Thornhill Elementary, 89% (182 of 198 respondents) of the students are able to name two caring adults. It is the hope that with continued partnerships and community support, there will be a shift towards 100% of students feeling a strong connection of belonging to Thornhill's School community.

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