School-Community Partnerships: Building Healthy Communities with Youth

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Abstract
This commentary shares the experiences of various partners in Public Health, Public Education, and Civic Engagement who developed and participated in a School-Community Partnership in southern Ontario (Canada). The purpose of the Partnership is to foster stronger relationships between schools and communities; to promote high school students’ engagement in local conversations and decision-making; and to build more inclusive, healthy communities. Rooted in a set of shared values, the School-Community Partnership provides feasible opportunities for students to shape where and how they live. We illustrate how health promotion can build capacity to engage a range of participants and deepen youth involvement in the healthy growth and development of their communities. We also outline some of the challenges we have faced in our efforts to work across sectors.

Keywords: health promotion, high school classrooms, student engagement, citizenship education, School-Community Partnerships

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An Introduction to School-Community Partnerships

An artist in front of a canvas is confronted with a decision about how to engage with the complexities of the world. The creative process can be so disorienting that it sometimes seems easier to just leave it the way it stands. At the same time, there is the excitement of possibility, the cathartic pleasures of drawing from personal experiences, knowledge, and know-how, the thrill of taking risks, the reward of enabling the creative expression of something transformational, and the fun of sharing it with others.

We believe high school classrooms are ideal places to embrace the complexities of the world; such environments are where art comes alive. We create our art through a process of developing School-Community Partnerships (SCP). The SCP process begins with establishing a partnership between Public Health staff and teachers. The partnership grows into relationships as we co-develop learning opportunities that combine various Ontario school curricula (e.g., Grade 9 Geography, Grade 10 Business) with relevant community issues that affect the health of our youth and our communities. SCPs leverage the commonalities between Health and Education to focus on our holistic development as individuals, and as a community.

The process evolves to include partners from Public Health (e.g., health promoters, public health nurses) and Education (e.g., teachers, students), as well as those in the realm of Civic Engagement (e.g., municipal staff, non-profit organizations). An SCP aims to promote high school classrooms as places that embrace complex conversations. Local community partners, local experts, and local decision makers are invited to be part of the discussions in classrooms alongside students. Together, we explore different perspectives and challenge ourselves to see new opportunities for
teaching and learning about building more inclusive, healthy communities. More than a

group of people inhabiting the same space, we are driven by common goals, shared

ownership and responsibilities, and harnessing our individual and collective strengths.

Through ongoing dialogue in the classroom between students, their teachers,

and caring adults from the community, we develop critical thinking skills, build

relationships, nurture an informed and engaged citizenry, influence community

conversations, and ultimately create spaces where everyone can thrive. Specifically,

students participating in SCPs are learning to become part of a community inside the

classroom and out, while also fulfilling credit obligations. Students gain a sense of

belonging, self-efficacy, and agency to shape their broader community, set against the

backdrop of real circumstances.

As a multi-sectoral partnership, we have collaborated closely together in

classrooms and so we have chosen to collaborate in writing this commentary. You will

hear the voices of Public Health staff (Kendra), teaching staff (Joanne), municipal staff

(Lisa), and one (now graduated) student (Ryan) as we reflect on our experiences in

developing SCPs for youth citizenship and engagement.

SCP s and Health Promotion

Health is a resource for life. That is, health is about the capacity of people to

adapt to, respond to, and/or control life’s challenges and changes (Frankish et al.,

1996). Health promotion is the art of developing those capacities by advocating,
enabling, and mediating. Moreover, health promotion is about building capacity in

everyone to fully participate and be in control of the things that influence our own health,
growth, and development (WHO, 1986). An SCP is a health promotion approach that develops the capacity of both youth and supportive adults around youth to participate in civic processes that shape the health of their communities.

Influenced by the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986), the initial role of Public Health staff in our SCP experience is to mediate the partnership between School and Community by enabling all those involved to further develop their personal skills to connect meaningfully with each other. Developing personal skills (e.g., adults learning how to engage with youth; youth learning how to engage in civic and community processes) through building relationships creates a strong foundation upon which to work towards strengthening community action (e.g., youth practicing communication and advocacy skills). Moreover, given the context of the conversations in the classrooms, those actions are intended to further the health promotion strategies of creating supportive environments and building healthy public policy.

For the SPCs described in this commentary, the level of youth engagement on Hart’s Ladder of Participation is located near the middle rungs (Hart, 1992). We endeavour to push ourselves to reach higher rungs by thoughtfully evolving the program. Our projects aim to create capacity for youth to participate and create capacity for community organizations to better engage youth. Our decisions are guided by information provided by students, not just information from literature or best practices. We ask for feedback regularly and we pay attention in each class, listening and making adjustments. We provide channels for students to make their own decisions and take ownership of various pieces of the program.
Partnerships Driven by Shared Values

The values that keep us aligned have been developed into five key messages that we promote at every opportunity. Derived from a need for shared language and principles across sectors to guide our interactions and decision making, we created these messages based extensively on health and education literature, and years of professional practice. They ground us to our purpose and push us in new directions:

(i) **Strengths Based:** Our strategy will build up using the unique assets of each school and community.

(ii) **Meaningful Engagement:** Our strategy will include adults and young people in ways that empower and challenge them.

(iii) **Comprehensive:** Our strategy will integrate policy, curriculum, awareness, supportive social environments, healthy physical spaces, and community partners.

(iv) **Sustainable:** Our strategy will connect to a long-term vision within our school and community culture.

(v) **Whole-Community Impact:** The impact of our strategy will reach beyond small groups of students and staff, benefiting our whole community.

These shared values have led us to co-plan and co-teach several initiatives together in classrooms and schools in multiple communities, formulating several collaborations. Our work is the creation of a partnership that shifts conventional classroom experiences (e.g., the expert teacher and/or text transmitting fixed
knowledge to an assumed passive learner) to one that is alive with the sense of community and belonging, inquiry and discussion, relationships and experiences, and shared problem solving.

A Snapshot of SCPs

The Grade 9 Geography People and Places Initiative is an example of one SCP that runs between 5 to 7 weeks over a 20-week semester. Each week has 2 to 3 classes devoted to either a guest speaker invited from the community, a learning module, a field trip, or class time dedicated to a final project (see Figure 1 for an example of the program outline). For the past four years, SCPs have been implemented in over 18 geography classrooms in three high schools in one school Board in southern Ontario (Canada).

The Liveable Communities component of the Grade 9 Geography curriculum focuses on “the need for students to recognize how the infrastructure of a community can affect its liveability and its environmental, economic, and social sustainability … [whereby students] will have the opportunity to develop strategies for making their community a more sustainable place in which to live” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 64). We currently have four SCP Liveable Communities themes developed for classes to choose from: 1) food systems; 2) transportation networks; 3) natural environments/climate change; and 4) neighbourhood design and housing. Each theme is comprised of customized introductory modules, guest speakers, field trip itineraries, and culminating projects.
The People and Places Initiative is structured around a relevant community issue related to a Liveable Communities theme. The guest speakers, field trips, modules, and reflections are all elements that develop youth knowledge, skills, and relationships, thus inviting students to connect to the selected issue. There is also an intention of facilitating opportunities for youth to engage with the issue through a culminating project and/or event. For example, delegates from one Geography class hosted a Town Council meeting and made lively presentations to endorse their local community’s participation in an environmental action campaign (e.g., the Blue Dot movement). In another class, students shared their reflections, concerns, and general feedback about local transportation challenges with municipal staff and decision-makers at a community wide event.

A strength of our SCP approach is that we co-design various resources across sectors to support the whole process. For example, we provide visual slides and short handouts that explain the SCP to new partners. This includes a facilitator guide to gently remind partners that classrooms are comprised of a diverse range of learners and the importance of making the learning relevant and connected to youth. We implement reflection cards for students to take notes on key learnings and make thoughtful connections. We also draw from a list of recommended field trips and itineraries that offer experiential learning related to the liveable community theme (e.g., Jane’s Walks or chartering a municipal bus to tour the community). Modules for teachers deliver foundational concepts to students (the three core modules include Density & Diversity, Design, and Equity) and provide an opportunity to connect speakers to core themes in the curriculum. We also have group interview questions to conclude the process for
students, teachers, and community partners to reflect on the experience and provide insights about the future implementation of the partnership.

**Arranging the Palette: The Role of Public Health Staff – Kendra’s Perspective**

In my role as a health promoter, I spend some time in the classroom, but most of my work is spent planning the initiative outside the classroom. The process of SCP is mostly about gathering materials to facilitate a group of people making art (collaborating) together. It is very exciting to begin with only an idea that could lend well to a variety of potential outcomes depending on interests and on how far we can develop the capacities of all the resources we can assemble.

One of the first steps is a much-anticipated meeting with teachers. I include other Public Health staff, Municipal staff, and/or community partners to spread community leadership across sectors, lending to greater sustainability and meaningful engagement. We begin building relationships with each other at these initial meetings, setting preliminary direction for the semester. We get a sense of students’ interests, capacities, and start making connections to relevant community issues. Throughout this process, we continually think about building assets in young people, drawing from the 5 shared values, and nurture community in the classroom.

With these conversations in mind, I embark on another set of meetings with experts in the field to outline ideas for our schedule (see example, Fig. 1 - Transportation Networks). Within the context of having identified a relevant community issue, such as Transportation Networks, we ask ourselves, “What do students need to develop their own ideas and empower their voices?” This question lends well to
deciding what could be taught and how it could be covered both inside and outside of the classroom. It is also a question that no one sector alone can answer. For me, it is through collaboration that we start to select the paint colours that we think will lend well to the art we are creating. I appreciate working collaboratively, because it is through the merging of multiple perspectives that we make the process interesting while deepening personal learning and growth.

One of the final steps in this collaborative process is reaching out to potential community partners to confirm who is willing to participate. We tap into our existing network as well as initiate new relationships (e.g., people from municipalities, non-profit

**Figure 1: Transportation Networks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Project</th>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Week 2</th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Week 4</th>
<th>Week 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intro Activity Representative, COB</td>
<td>Mobility Hubs Planning, COB</td>
<td>Transportation Plan Planning, COB</td>
<td>Community Cycling Rolling Horse &amp; SoBi</td>
<td>Transit &amp; Equity BFAST</td>
<td>Final Project Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intro Module</td>
<td>Density &amp; Diversity Module</td>
<td>Design Module</td>
<td>Equity Module</td>
<td>Final Project Places youth go</td>
<td>Final Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Plan Representative, Chief Administrator’s Office, COB</td>
<td>Transit Strategy Transit, COB</td>
<td>Autonomous Vehicles ITAC</td>
<td>Jane’s Walk</td>
<td>Feedback To City</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COB = City of Burlington  
ITAC = Integrated Transit Advisory Committee, a volunteer citizen committee that advises city council on transportation issues  
BFAST = Burlington For Accessible and Sustainable Transit, an advocacy group for Transit  
Rolling Horse = Rolling House Community Cycle, a community bike shop  
SoBi = Social Bicycle, a bike share program based in Hamilton
or charity organizations, elected officials, volunteer citizens on advisory committees of council, community advocates and so on). We conduct ongoing assessments of what is missing, what needs a boost, and adjust accordingly to be more effective.

For me, the real thrill is watching the efforts of thoughtful planning unfold in the classroom. It is delightful to see students play with the paint on their brushes (concepts), expressing their ideas with peers and caring adults in ways that complement, accentuate, or blend. It is also encouraging to hear stories from community partners who have been in the classroom. For example, Transportation Planners involved in one SCP valued the youth input they received so much that they are now in the midst of implementing the municipality’s first pedestrian crossovers (a new tool that provides pedestrians the right of way in Ontario). Their plan is a result of soliciting student voice about key locations needing a safe crossing in the community. Between hearing stories like this and observing relationships grow in the classroom, the excitement of possibilities is heightened all over again.

Assembling the Brushes: The Role of the Classroom Teacher – Joanne’s Perspective

What we teach and how we teach today’s youth is increasingly complex. Learners, as citizens arriving in their classrooms already armed with different everyday life experiences and perspectives, have knowledge that can be shared with peers and community members. In this way, students become subjects (brushes) in the teaching and learning process. Providing occasions for students to analyze and discuss their community from multiple perspectives with a view to transforming it provides
opportunities for students to make connections so that learning is socially and personally meaningful (Miller, 2007).

As a Geography teacher, I view it as my responsibility to nurture a sense of community in the classroom where all students feel recognized, appreciated, and respected. If students see themselves reflected in what is taught and how it is taught, then students may see the classroom as a place where they feel welcome and belong. Taking the time to build relationships with my students, and among students, is a key component of nurturing a more inclusive social and learning environment. Nurturing classroom communities asks all of us (teachers and students) to be vulnerable: to reveal our human side. Classroom investments in the sharing of stories, experiences, and values can deepen students’ sense of belonging and relationships. In my experience, students are more likely to engage in SCPs when a safe-enough classroom space and community has already been established and they feel like their voice matters.

Guiding students to recognize and practice norms and skills to enter into dialogue, such as articulating a response in front of peers and patient peer-to-peer listening, is important to engage youth. For example, whole class circle discussions help to develop students’ capacity to enter into various discussion activities, and thus for students to practice sharing their ideas with, and listening to, friends and strangers in the room (Parker, 2010). To do this, I introduce low-risk topics, and invite each student to speak one at a time. For instance, I ask students to share what they think about (in)equitable access to transit in their local community. These open-ended opportunities tend to surface a wide range of students’ opinions and experiences about their
community - including from those who usually remain silent during classroom discussions. Thus, in my experiences, facilitating sharing activities opens possibility spaces to build classroom community and to ready my students to engage with various community partners.

*Painting: The Role of Municipal Staff – Lisa’s Perspective*

Traditionally, municipal staff have taken a one-way outreach approach where we present information and hope that the youth in our community latch on to the words we say. The SCP has acted as a platform, giving us the opportunity to re-evaluate how we connect with youth, transitioning to a two-way engagement strategy. Being present in the classroom gives the students a chance to build relationships with municipal staff (e.g., city planners, recreation coordinators, transportation planners, etc.) as well as highlight various career paths.

In my role as a recreation coordinator for youth outreach, I work closely with other municipal staff to develop their skills for building relationships with youth. For example, one presenter elicited student feedback about a controversial proposed condo that could become the tallest building in the municipality. We provided youth with the context of the issues under consideration (such as affordability, accessibility, sustainability), and then we facilitated opportunities for students to express their opinions and concerns on the issue. We documented students’ perspectives which were later shared with management staff as part of the larger community conversation. Without this particular SCP relationship, student voice would have been absent in the
decision making process. It is satisfying to know that I was a part of helping the next generation build capacity to deepen their own community involvement.

**Reflecting on Our Canvas – School Community Partnerships**

*(i) Getting Started*

A frequently asked question about this project is how the connection to the school setting came about. This question in itself highlights a shared challenge in building community partnerships within schools. Schools can be difficult for outside organizations to gain access to. Addressing this challenge begins with building relationships. For example, after reaching out to several schools, we (one health promoter and a public health nurse) were lucky to find one high school principal who was open to discussing what a partnership might look like, who then issued an open invitation to interested staff to participate. The relationships we made in this initial school propelled us into other schools as administrators and teachers transferred within the school board. Similar to the snowball effect, we are able to sustain relationships as well as gain entry into multiple schools and classrooms.

Another challenge in building partnerships across sectors is our ability to recognize and understand everyone’s core interests. Knowing our individual interests, we can purposely integrate them into our actions using our five key messages. For example, the curriculum has been and will continue to be a central focus for schools. The SCP is positioned as something that easily fits into delivering curriculum, as opposed to a short-lived, extraneous exercise.
(ii) Implementing

For all involved in co-creating an SCP, it can be challenging to deviate from the familiar. It is tempting to be drawn back into what is comfortable - similar to following instructions that come in a paint-by-numbers kit. We recognize that there is an initial discomfort for all those involved in an SCP. By working collaboratively, we are opening up our professional practice, taking healthy risks, and trying new approaches. Moreover, SCPs are about working with a long-term lens and allowing time for the partnership to develop rather than rushing to achieve milestones within a given month, semester, or school year. SCPs are about taking a developmental approach to our work. That is, we evaluate our work as we go, build on it, and allow it to evolve over time. Unlike programs that are static or prescriptive, SCPs are intended to grow into more robust expressions of our shared values. We address our initial discomfort by implementing an SCP such as the Grade 9 Geography People and Places Initiative, together.

What follows are two participant reflections from one of our early SCPs. The first reflection is from a Grade 9 Geography teacher who discusses the implementation process of the SCP in her classroom. The second, one of her former students, reflects back on the SCP experience now as a graduating grade 12 student in 2017.

Teacher Reflection:

*Teaching students to become active and engaged citizens requires me, as their teacher, to expand learning opportunities outside the classroom to include community voices and experiences. Tapping into community resources through SCPs has enhanced my teaching practice. More traditional teachers locked in lecture and rote
learning may find it difficult to relinquish their role as content experts. Here lies a challenge as teachers: admitting that we cannot possibly know everything. I must model curiosity and vulnerability if I expect my students to do the same. Collaboration with health promotion staff and community partners necessitates that we learn alongside our students and open ourselves to being shaped by what happens during the process. From my own experience, opening the classroom door to SCPs taught me a great deal about my students’ community - a place I had never lived in myself. The program brought me closer to understanding my students, their sense of place, challenges they faced, and solutions they viewed as achievable.

Student Reflection:

To many teenagers, curiosity in their freshmen year of high school is a death sentence. Don’t be curious about your classes: you’ll be ostracized. Don’t be curious about joining a club or sports team: nobody will join you. And above all, don’t be curious about yourself: nobody wants to listen to your discoveries. This is the reality to the bright-eyed students too afraid to ask questions but desperate to understand what makes the world around them tick.

In the early months of my grade 9 Geography class, we welcomed a series of visitors into our classroom. The idea, very simply, was to get us talking. Geography is, of course, the study of the earth and the people that call it home. After a few months, however, they became much more than that. They became mental excursions, ways for us to learn how to question, all in the security of an accepting environment. We challenged our own ingrained perceptions, the accepted practices of governmental
bodies, and even those who said that what we were accomplishing in that very classroom was impossible - curiosity.

For this student, SCPs provided memorable experiences and opportunities to overcome uncertainties.

In another school setting, a teacher remarked that while it was challenging to co-plan a bus tour of the community, the process of planning together built on the strengths and experiences of the co-planners. He further reflected that while extra effort was needed to collaborate, the field trip provided an opportunity for students and adults to meaningfully engage with each other in the community, ultimately making that experience a highlight of the course that semester. Thus, it seems that it is worth the initial effort to reach a place where we can engage with youth positively and constructively.

(iii) Sustaining and Growing

As more themes and community issues emerge to influence the direction of the Grade 9 Geography SCP, there is an ongoing need to develop an ever-expanding network of community partners. It takes effort to maintain and grow a network, but a large and well connected network is a huge asset for all kinds of community outcomes. Like all collaborative partnerships, we cannot guarantee that people we have built connections with will be consistently available. For example, teachers and school administrators can be shifted to different roles and to different schools. Similarly, strong community partners can change roles within their organization or change organizations
entirely. Such changes help to grow and spread an SCP and such changes can also mean periodically restarting the engagement process with new partners.

One of the celebrated attributes of the Grade 9 geography SCP is that it can reach an entire cohort of students in a meaningful, comprehensive, and sustainable way. Grade 9 is a logical entry point and a foundation to build on for more SCPs in Grade 10, 11, and 12. To have an even stronger whole-community impact, there would need to be several concurrent SCPs within a school or within several schools in a defined geographic region (e.g., school board).

Conclusion

Our work together is a lot like art; it does not follow one set of steps or rules to arrive at a predetermined outcome, rather it is guided by an authentic purpose. SCPs develop into the full expression of the people and experiences behind the work. This commentary paints a picture that invites you to view classrooms differently, and to feel a sense of the shared values that have guided our decisions and actions. We want viewers to know why we’ve done what we’ve done and why it matters.

As health promotion practitioners, we acknowledge that there have been challenges and there will continue to be hurdles to overcome as we push ourselves to live up to our own values. Examples of constraints include time and resources, decisions by others, and other external influences outside of our control. Even when we think we have our art supplies all in one spot, they have a tendency to want to wander back to their familiar places. Maybe a teacher no longer follows through on something previously decided upon. Maybe a community partner can no longer commit themselves
to their involvement. Yet even when such problems arise, we creatively problem-solve with agility and dexterity, never losing sight of the shared values that draw us together and motivate our actions. We learn from our experiences and do better with our next opportunity.

Sometimes, to appreciate art or the type of complex work we do, it helps to look at the canvas from a distance. The act of writing this commentary has given us an appreciation not only for where we have gone but also where we are going. We ask our students to challenge the way they see their communities and to begin to interact with it as though it is malleable, changeable, and improvable. We also ask ourselves as adults to challenge the way we work. We have challenged the location of where our work typically takes place and the ways that collaboration looks and feels. Each time that we deliver an SCP, we improve the art that drives us. As we go forward, we know that we can do even more when we work thoughtfully together to set new boundaries for complex conversations about how to shape our communities so that everyone can thrive. As we go forward, we invite you, the reader, to look upon our shared canvas with the excitement of possibility.
References


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