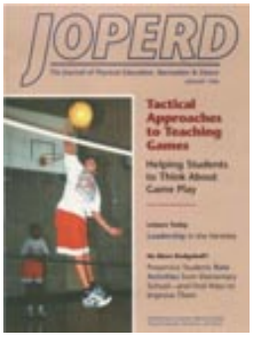

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Creating a Healthy School Community?

Consider Critical Elements of Educational Change

Douglas L. Gleddie
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In recent years the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) has begun to use the term "healthy school communities" (HSC) to encompass the goals and mandate of the coordinated school health framework (also known as comprehensive school health programs or health-promoting schools; Valois, Slade, & Ashford, 2011). Part of the rationale for this shift in vocabulary has to do with an attempt to better align health goals with education goals as opposed to a "health program" (Hoyle, Bartee, & Allensworth, 2010). In the past, health programs have often fallen on individual teachers with little to no recognition of the whole school community. Under the HSC umbrella educators seek to develop the requisite capacity to enable healthy living, learning and working. Such capacity building requires considerable attention, action and resources. That is, becoming an HSC generally necessitates moving from practices that rely mainly on small-scale, classroom-based

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health education models to a more comprehensive health-promotion approach that focuses on all students' attitudes, behaviors and learning environments (Deschenes, Martin, & Jomphe Hill, 2003). Moreover, the introduction of an HSC model need not necessarily be limited to a single school site; some have introduced an HSC approach in a much larger, district-wide fashion (Gleddie, 2012a). Whatever the scope, the successful implementation of HSC requires significant effort through ownership and empowerment, leadership and management, collaboration and integration (Gleddie, 2012a, 2012b; Inchley, Muldoon, & Currie, 2007).

Given the considerable reallocation of attention, action and resources that is required when this approach is adopted, becoming an HSC might be rightly regarded as an exercise in school change. With this understanding firmly in place, three aspects of school change should be closely considered: (1) the role of professional development, (2) leadership capacity building, and (3) cultural change in school settings. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it will provide an overview and commentary on the three aspects of school change applicable to HSC. Second, it will provide practical applications of these aspects within the school context.

Critical Element 1: Professional Development

The professional development of teachers is widely recognized as one of the essential elements for effective program implementation (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000). To this point, Michael Fullan, a widely respected leader, authority and advocate for school change and reform, explained that sustained professional development is crucial in order for any purposeful exercises in school change to be successful (1999). A number of others have supported this notion, adding that professional development must go beyond the beginning stages of implementation and extend to subsequent months or years (Fullan et al., 2005; Moffett, 2000; Thompson, 2003). Teachers who receive ongoing support through specific and timely professional development while (and after) they have opportunities to experience contextual learning are more likely to continue with a newly introduced practice (Thompson, 2003). Long-term, sustained professional development such as this enables adult learning with numerous and authentic opportunities for meaningful reflection upon that learning. Moreover, because teachers are so often isolated within their own classes or schools, district-wide professional development meant to provide such ongoing support should also include training in collaboration skills; these collaboration skills might include group processes, defining roles and responsibilities, and listening skills (Trubowitz, 2001). With such a focus on collaboration skills, peers (rather than "outside" authorities) may become enabled to act as ongoing supports for one another.

Meaningful and ongoing professional development will equip teachers and other HSC champions with the requisite knowledge, skills, attitudes and professional networks to ensure long-term attention and sustainability. An example of excellent practice in the area of professional development is the Healthy Active School Symposia (HASS) run by Ever Active Schools (EAS, 2015). Schools are invited to attend a one-day event that involves much more than just this single day. According to EAS (2015),

> (HASS) are events designed to provide Alberta school communities with the knowledge, skills and resources to enhance student wellness. HASS are a catalyst for sustained change within the participating school communities. The events focus on inspiring student leadership by developing the competencies needed to become engaged thinkers and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit, through a Comprehensive School Health approach. HASS empowers students to be active agents of change in building a school community that enhances their learning and fosters their personal growth and well-being.

Each school is encouraged to bring a collaborative team to the day: student leaders, teachers, administrators, parents, public health staff and more. In this way, learning happens together and the team gains time to discuss and to plan prior to returning to their school community. These events are scheduled for the beginning of the school year so that teams can use the HASS as a springboard to effect change in their individual school contexts.

A key aspect of this form of professional development is support for sustaining and tracking growth. Prior to the event, school teams are encouraged to complete the Healthy School Planner foundational module (Joint Consortium for School Health, 2015). This module acts as a self-assessment for the school team to understand the process of building a healthy school community. During the HASS each team creates an inquiry-based action plan detailing goals, activities, timelines, roles, indicators and celebrations appropriate to their context. During the upcoming school year each team works to achieve their plan and also shares their progress with other schools and with EAS. Success stories and challenges are shared, with valuable lessons from both. In this way, a community is developed across contexts with learning occurring within and between participating schools. The HASS model is one that could easily be adopted by local school jurisdictions seeking effective, collaborative and sustained professional development for creating and supporting healthy school communities.

Critical Element 2: Leadership Capacity Building

School change requires leadership to be shared, or distributed, at many levels (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves, 2007; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Roberts et al., 2015). That is to say, leadership within school communities must be purposely distributed more widely than exclusively to principals and superintendents (Hargreaves, 2009). Such a view of leadership certainly contrasts with more traditional notions related to school administration. In many ways, this sort of shared or distributed leadership might be rightly regarded as a collective process of inclusive leadership, whereby all interested people are included or fairly represented (Ryan, 2006). In addition to the empowerment of all stakeholders, the shared duty of responsibility, and the collective "ownership" of school change efforts, the model of inclusive leadership also enables principal/superintendent successions to have a minimal negative impact (Hargreaves, 2007). That is, when leadership is shared in such a manner, losing the head of a unit (e.g., school, school district) is unlikely to result in the ruination or cancelation of a school program introduced under that head's tenure. Relatedly, Hargreaves (2007) summarized four opportunities that are possible in quality leadership succession: increasing leadership stability, building systematic leadership, developing distributed leadership, and creating coaches for new leaders. The importance of such sustainable leadership has been raised by others (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, 2006; Moffett, 2000). For example, Fullan (2002) also identified four components of sustainability: developing the social environment, contextual learning, leadership cultivation at multiple levels, and enhancing the teaching professionals themselves through improved working conditions.

School leaders, whether as principals or superintendents, cannot create an HSC on their own; any such attempts are destined to fail. Instead, leadership should be viewed more broadly so that teachers, parents, community members and students can become champions of change within their school communities. A recent study focusing on the role of the principal in healthy school communities found that shared or collaborative leadership was a critical factor for principals to consider:

> If you want people on board and supporting what you feel is important, you need to approach it from a bottom up direction, not a top down directive. You need to empower the people and inspire the people around you so that they too feel it is their responsibility and their accountability and take full ownership of that. (Roberts et al., 2015, p. 5)

One practical way to encourage leadership from the bottom up is for principals to actively get behind teacher or parent leadership for the creation of healthy school communities. Support of this nature may take many forms, including scheduling time at staff meetings and parent councils to discuss initiatives; providing financial resources; allocating time for planning, implementation and evaluation; and making space for health in public addresses to students, parents and the community.

The creation of multi-stakeholder school health teams is another way to distribute leadership and to ensure collective ownership. For example, one rural school created a student wellness action team (SWAT). Membership includes several teachers, administrators, parents, public health staff and, of course, student leaders. The SWAT meets monthly to plan initiatives, evaluate success, and assess their community. They attend conferences or professional development events individually or collectively, and then share what they have learned with the rest of the team. An advantage of a team approach such as SWAT is that if one or two members graduate or move on to other schools, the structure still remains. The SWAT is now an integral part of how the school does business. New members can be found to replace those who have left and can be mentored by the rest of the team.

Critical Element 3: Cultural Change

Changing the ethos, or transforming the culture, within a school community is not a fast or easy process. Nonetheless, doing so is certainly an important one. Indeed, changing what school community members value and how they work together to achieve an environment where such values are routinely lived leads to deep, lasting change (Fullan, 2002). Such lasting school change needs to reach deeper than the perfunctory introduction of a particular program or initiative — it must become a cultural shift of prioritized values and processes (Fullan et al., 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; O'Neill, 2000; Roberts et al., 2015). Such a cultural shift requires considerable time and effort. These requirements necessitate a number of crucial processes, including a creative communication network system. Ideal communication network systems include frequent stakeholder meetings, focus groups, face-to-face dialogue, small-group information-sharing sessions, ongoing oral and written updates, and parent and community meetings (Moffett, 2000). It cannot be understated that these processes must engage those from outside of the immediate school community, as community consultation is a critical component to cultural change (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000; Moffett, 2000). Such coordinated efforts to transform school culture must also attend to defining and focusing on a moral purpose (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Indeed, to some, the primary focus of school change must be to engage people's moral purpose. To Fullan et al. (2005), a moral purpose in school change ought to focus on enhancing society through improving educational systems and the learning of all citizens. In their model, moral purpose is both a role and a process. Cultural change viewed in this respect seeks to engage a type of reform that is concerned primarily with democracy, social justice, equity, narrowing gaps, and developing contributing citizens.

Finally, meaningful school change efforts will best occur when those changes are in close alignment with the culture of the school, particularly as that culture relates to a moral purpose; such a moral purpose might best be articulated as a mission or vision. For exam-

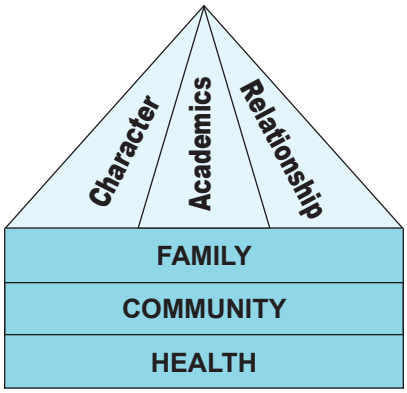

Figure 1.
Battle River School Division
Pyramid of Success

ple, the Battle River School Division decided to embrace the concept of healthy school communities. To move their goals forward, they had a multi-stakeholder district-level steering committee, local school champions and school health teams, and school and district professional development days featuring healthy school concepts. In addition to all this work, one of the most important things that Battle River did was embed health into their moral purpose. The division's values were expressed through the "Pyramid of Success" (see Figure 1).

The pyramid serves as a visual reminder to students, parents, the community and staff of what is important. In 2009, as part of their HSC initiative, the division added the foundational block of "health" — thereby embedding wellness into their moral purpose (Gleddie, 2012a). In Battle River each school needs to have a three-year plan addressing their school's goals. Now that health has been added as part of division policy (moral purpose), each school is held accountable for school and student health goals as well. A teacher in the division put it this way:

> Every school has to put these goals on their three-year plan. So that's the accountability piece right there within each building . . . I think the success of this project will live on because each administrator has to be responsible. (Gleddie, 2012b, p. 88)

Concluding Comments

Given the perceived potential and achieved success of various HSC initiatives, other school communities should also attend to these three important considerations if they similarly want meaningful school change to occur. This is especially true when one considers the many competing programs, initiatives and points of view vying to have a primary place within schools today. In order to stand out and to become a mainstay within schools, HSC implementation might be best served by attending to these three aspects of school change.

Although three aspects of school change for introducing an HSC approach to a school community are offered here, there has been no purposeful intention to ascribe relative values of importance or difficulty to them. Indeed, it would not be easy to make the claim that one might be more or less important than another, especially when one considers that they are in some respects overlapping concepts and are certainly interconnected. Similarly, it is not easy to rank one of these as more or less difficult than any other. As is true about all school change efforts, context matters. Different schools come with different people, different resources, and different starting points. Irrespective of these differences, all schools might best realize their potential as HSC sites with a purposeful and systematic attention to HSC-related professional development, leadership capacity building, and cultural change.

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