

Beyond the school walls: Connecting to community supports

It is often said that “schools can’t do it alone.” According to Dr. Nina Bascia (2014), the places where students learn should be viewed as a series of nested and interacting environments: classrooms within schools, and schools within communities.

Schools rely on their community partners to provide much-needed support in many areas outside of academic learning. By working with community organizations such as Public Health, mental health services, and municipal recreation programs, schools are reaching beyond their walls to access the resources, supports, and broader learning experiences that may not be available within the school. These community connections support students’ learning and growth, and help to ensure their success, both at school and beyond.

Results from a 2018 survey conducted by Ophea—a non-profit organization that supports health and physical education in Ontario—found that the majority (65%) of parents agree that their children’s schools engage with the broader community around it. In our survey, many principals commented that one of their greatest school successes is related to having a strong and supportive relationship with their community. They report working with a range of community partners to provide resources and support for their students.

“ [Our school] is a fantastic community based school. We have a very dedicated staff who bring their passion to the job every day. Our students feel like they are part of a family and they come to school excited to face the challenges of the day. The school council works hand in hand with staff to support the learning needs of the students and was instrumental in starting a school wide snack program for the students.”

Elementary school,
Toronto DSB

In 2018:

- 19% of elementary schools and 18% of secondary schools report that they have a staff member (other than the principal or vice-principal) acting as a community liaison.
- Elementary schools in urban areas are more likely to have a community liaison than those in rural areas.
- 94% of elementary and 100% of secondary schools collaborate with mental health care services.

“We have many newcomers that are benefiting greatly from the ESL program. Our Nutrition Program invites parents and guardians to volunteer. We collaborate well with our Public Health Nurse and Police Liaison Officers. Strong sense of community and community partnerships.”

Elementary school,
Toronto Catholic DSB

Creating “Quality Learning Environments”—the role of school-community connections

As part of an ongoing research initiative, People for Education has been working with experts from across Canada to define vital competencies and skills in health, social-emotional learning, creativity, and citizenship. This research also identifies conditions in the classroom, school, and community that support student growth in these areas (Bascia, 2014). Among the most important are “school-community relationships [that] focus on students’ well-being, promote cross-cultural perspectives, and provide a range of diverse learning opportunities for students” (People for Education, 2018b).

In her paper on quality learning environments, Dr. Nina Bascia outlines several important areas in relation to school-community partnerships. She argues that rich school-community relations can contribute to curriculum learning, bring deeper involvement of community into schools, support experiential learning and ongoing student mentorship, support appreciation of diversity, and increase awareness for students on where to access programs and services that support issues related to mental illness, bullying, and substance abuse (Bascia, 2014).

Working together for student success

This year, we asked schools how frequently they connect or work with certain groups, by sharing resources, co-planning, sharing space, or supporting students. Principals report a wide range of connections, from sharing the school building with a community centre to bringing in drug and alcohol intervention programs for students.

According to the survey findings, schools connect most often with organizations that support student health and well-being. Almost all elementary and secondary principals report connections with social services, mental health care services, and Public Health.

The high proportion of schools that report connecting “often” or “sometimes” with these community resources may reflect the increasing demand for mental health and social service supports for students. Even though 94% of elementary schools and 100% of secondary schools report they connect sometimes or often with mental health providers, the survey results indicate that this may still be insufficient: 13% of elementary and 8% of secondary principals report that mental health services are inaccessible. Many principals included additional comments about limited access to these resources.

The survey results show that elementary and secondary schools access different types of services to meet their specific needs. For example, elementary schools are much more likely than secondary schools to report using childcare services (81% compared to 20%). Among secondary schools, 90% of the respondents report connections with youth employment programs (see Figure 9.1).

“Social services are extremely overwhelmed—we have far too many students with needs and not enough service providers to meet them. Local community agencies are terrific—the local library and recreation facilities do a great deal for us and join us at every opportunity.”

Elementary school,
Lambton Kent DSB

Figure 9.1

Percentage of schools that report connecting with the following community groups

Community group	Elementary	Secondary
Childcare	81%	20%
Indigenous organizations	56%	79%
Mental health care services	94%	100%
Municipal recreation programs	80%	84%
Public Health	97%	99%
Public library	79%	62%
Settlement programs	46%	51%
Social services	93%	98%
Youth employment	N/A	90%

Different communities, different needs

School communities in Ottawa or Toronto have different needs from those in Wingham or Elliot Lake, and the community resources they use reflect those differences. In their comments, many survey participants note that in rural areas, the distance between the school and the community limits access to some of these supports. Principals in French language boards also note that it can sometimes be difficult to access services in French.

In 2018, elementary schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) are over four times as likely to connect with settlement programs as those in Northern Ontario (see Figure 9.2). This is not surprising, given that three in ten newcomers to Canada settle in the GTA (Bonikowska, Hou, & Picot, 2015).

The survey findings also show that elementary schools in Northern Ontario are more likely to connect or work with Indigenous organizations than those in the GTA. Again, this may be due to differences in population makeup. Although the majority of Indigenous people across Canada live in urban areas (Statistics Canada, 2017), the proportion of Indigenous students per school is higher in Northern Ontario than in the GTA (People for Education, 2013).

“The geography of a large rural board with services sometimes significant distances away, and a lack of transportation for families, can be a barrier to many families’ access to these services.”

Elementary school,
Avon Maitland DSB

“Rural school – no services in the village other than recreation.”

Elementary school,
Simcoe County DSB

“The majority of [community] groups do not speak French.”¹⁹

Elementary school,
Conseil scolaire de district
catholique des Aurores
boréales

19. Translated from French. Original comment: “La majorité de ces groupes ne parlent pas en français.”

“Services in French are unavailable or very minimally available. It is left up to previous and current administration to find organizations and establish links. The work is done by administration.”²⁰

Elementary school,
Conseil scolaire catholique
MonAvenir

Community liaison staff—the impact of family income and geography

Community liaisons are responsible for a range of tasks, from promoting school events to the community to connecting new families to social services and running parent engagement events. In 2018, 19% of elementary schools and 18% of secondary schools report that they have a staff member (other than the principal or vice-principal) acting as a community liaison. Among elementary schools, this is substantially lower than in the previous two years (six percentage points lower than in 2016); and among secondary schools, it is a record low. Furthermore, most of these liaison positions do not have any full-time equivalent (FTE) allocated to them, which means that they are not designated positions, but additional responsibilities taken on voluntarily by staff.

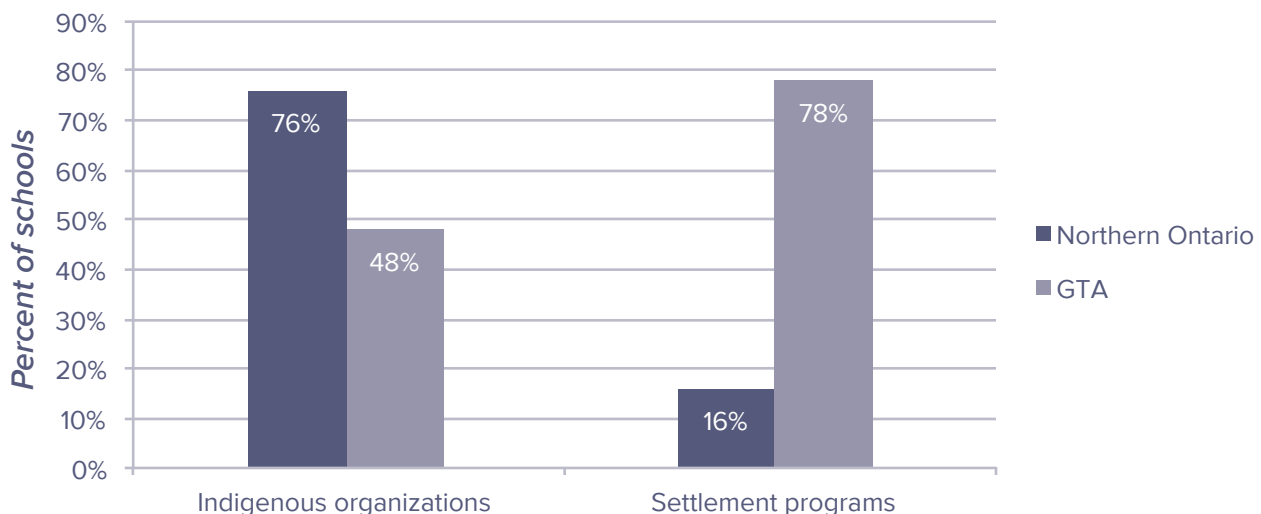
This year, we used information from Statistics Canada and Ontario’s Ministry of Education to examine the relationship between students’ family background and a range of resources and programs in schools. We compared the top and bottom 25% of our elementary school sample in terms of the proportion of families under the Low-Income Measure. For the sake of comparison, we refer to these as *high* and *low* poverty schools.

The survey findings show that *high poverty schools* are more likely to have a community liaison than *low poverty schools*. This is likely in response to community needs, as families living below the Low-Income Measure may have greater need for support in accessing services.

Geographic variations are also evident in the survey data. Elementary schools in urban areas are more likely to have a community liaison than those in rural areas (21% vs. 17%), and schools in urban areas with a liaison are more likely to have staff time allocated to that role.

Figure 9.2

Percent of elementary schools that report connecting with community groups, by region



20. Translated from French. Original comment: “Les services en français sont indisponibles ou très peu disponibles. C’est laissé à la découverte par la direction précédente et actuelle d’établir des liens et de trouver des solutions de type service. Le travail est fait par la direction.”

Recommendations

The province lacks clear policy to support greater integration of services and more effective cooperation between education and other levels of government. In 2015, the Premier appointed an Advisory Committee on Community Hubs to make recommendations about how to address some of the barriers to the integration of services and the development of community hubs (often in schools), so that public buildings can provide greater and more effective access to all services, including education (Advisory Committee on Community Hubs, 2015). The Advisory Committee made a number of recommendations, and outlined a need for:

- “Clear leadership that can cut across multiple ministries and agencies”
- Dedicated resources to build greater alignment and integration in planning and delivery of services
- Public sector reform and renewal to support policy-makers and public servants in working together across sectors and levels of government.

Chief among the recommendations of the Advisory Committee was that the province move responsibility for community hubs to the Treasury Board Secretariat, in order to provide an “across-government” responsibility for the work (Advisory Committee on Community Hubs, personal communication, January 9, 2018).

People for Education recommends that the province:

- Act on all of the recommendations from the Premier’s Advisory Committee.
- Develop a formula to fund community liaison staff in schools.