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# Why have community-school health advisory councils? How do I go about forming one?

By Carol Hinton, RN, MS, NCSN, Iowa

## Background

Schools can play a central role in promoting the health of children and adolescents in their communities.

Traditionally, school health has been limited to providing educational programs about human biology, growth, and development and to the clinical services provided by a school nurse. Today, schools recognize that children's health has a direct effect on their capacity to learn and also that the school's environment and extracurricular services can influence the health of children and adolescents.

Most communities define themselves by their school system, especially for issues that involve children and adolescents. As communities have become more aware and concerned about the health problems of children and youth, they naturally are turning to schools for solutions. Schools often can effect improvements in the health of the children and adolescents they serve. Immunization status can be monitored, referrals for health care can be made, and healthful behaviors can be taught and encouraged. Working alone, however, schools cannot solve the most troubling problems. Experience has shown that when schools involve parents in partnerships with the larger community, the burden of responsibility is shared, and many difficult problems can be addressed successfully.

One effective way to establish this partnership is to convene a community-school health advisory council. comprised of a broad cross-section of parents, business and community leaders, and school personnel, these councils facilitate communication and problem solving about health-related issues that affect children and adolescents. Although schools serve to convene the councils and many suggested actions occur within the schools, various activities require the participation of the whole community; many activities may be based outside of the school buildings as well. Each advisory council tends to develop an agenda that reflects its community's unique concerns, values, and resources.

A community-school health advisory council is one way to bring the community and school together to address access to mental health services for children, adolescents, and families. *Promoting Health Youth, Schools and Communities: A Guide to Community-School Health Advisory Councils* was developed in Iowa. Its purpose is to promote councils and remove barriers to their development. The American Cancer Society played a key role in collaborating with the Iowa Department of Public Health, the National Center for Health Education, the American School Health Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics to reprint the guide for wider distribution throughout the nation.

## Purpose of the Guide

The guide assists school districts in developing new school health councils, strengthening existing school health councils, and maintaining them as effective entities that can support and guide school health practices, programs, and policies. It is tailored to the planning needs of school district staff responsible for school health. The guide can also be useful to parents and other community partners interested in promoting the development of a school health council.

## Format of the Guide

The guide provides a practical, five-step approach to planning, developing, maintaining, and evaluating school health councils. Information is presented in a series of five short modules with brief explanations and specific worksheets and sample tools. It is organized as a "how-to" manual with information on planning and leading meetings, recruiting potential members, creating a vision for the council, creating and implementing action plans, and conducting evaluation on the council's work.

Every approach to and reason for creating a council is unique to the needs and desires of a school district. Some councils are mandated by legislation; some are developed with clear tasks and outcomes as articulated by the school

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administration. Still others may be the result of a few dedicated community members and school health advocates. The guide offers background reading, sample meeting handouts, checklists for planning, forms for reporting on the work accomplished, and other resource materials. Hard copies of most worksheets and handouts appear at the end of each step. A CD-ROM included with the guide contains a modifiable electronic version of the blank worksheets and sample handouts that council members can use in their current form or modify for their particular circumstances.

Each module begins with a statement of intended learning outcomes and finishes with next steps. Pages are numbered sequentially within modules. Although references are made to specific meetings (first, second, third, etc.), these five steps are fluid, and the amount of time and number of meetings required to accomplish the work will vary. Be flexible and adapt the content of the steps to your circumstances.

## Approach to Building the Council

There is no single, correct way to form a school health council, nor is there a "cookbook" approach for implementing a well-coordinated school health program. Schools and communities must work together to match the health needs of the student population with available or desired resources to craft solid plans that can have a positive impact on health behaviors for students and the community at large.

This guide offers a process to create and achieve the vision of children and youth who are healthy, able to learn, and able to leave school ready for life. To order *Promoting Healthy Youth, Schools and Communities: A Guide to Community-School Health Councils*, call 1-(800)-ACS-2345. The current cost for this publication is \$10.

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