



## **Youth Engagement Project**

### **A Research Report and Recommendations for OPHA to Support Public Health Staff to Enhance Protective Factors, Increase Resiliency and Reduce Illicit Drug Use with Students in Grades 6-8 in Ontario.**

**Contact:**

**Ben Rempel, Manager**  
**P: 416-367-3313 ext. 233**  
**E: [brempe1@opha.on.ca](mailto:brempe1@opha.on.ca)**

*Production of this Research Report has been made possible through a financial contribution from Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada.*

## **1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The mission of the Ontario Public Health Association is to provide leadership on issues affecting the public's health and to strengthen the impact of people who are active in public and community health throughout Ontario. To that end it supports local public health departments in responding to the Ontario Public Health Standards developed by the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care (Ontario Public Health Standards, 2008).

The Youth Engagement Project is expected to be one such support. Funded by Health Canada's Drug Strategy Community Initiatives Fund in 2009, the project will train and provide resources for public health professionals in six pilot projects occurring in public health units across the province. Formative, process and outcome evaluation activities will take place as part of an overall evaluation strategy developed with an external consultant. Expected outcomes include an enhancement of youth engagement and other protective factors associated with resiliency for youth ages 11-14. A long-term goal is the reduction in illicit drug use or other risk-taking behaviour.

It is expected that the pilot projects will form youth groups led by people in the community, (teacher, parent, youth worker, student or public health staff). Youth will problem-solve about ways to enhance their protective factor and solutions will be developed looking at opportunities within their community to support youth engagement in the school, in volunteerism or recreation. This process follows on the learnings of the Smoke-Free Ontario Strategy which many public health units engaged in recently.

This research report was commissioned to provide current and relevant research and literature on best and promising practices that could guide the project and the resources.

Over a period of three months and in collaboration with the planning team from OPHA and the partners, the author searched out relevant literature from peer-reviewed journals, and grey literature and was directed by key informants about literature and programs which fit the inclusion criteria. A synopsis of this literature and analysis and several recommendations for OPHA's pilot project were presented and this report developed. The results of this search were limited by time and budget which reduced access to all information that had been formally studied and published.

The literature review focused on four key areas – resiliency and protective factors, youth engagement, the settings approach for health promotion, and the prevention of illicit drug use plus the relevance of each of these with the target age group, with each other and with the inclusion criteria identified by the partners.

### **Findings**

1. Youth in Ontario ages 11-14 are experiencing or at risk for experiencing negative health outcomes based on current stats and trends. This relates to alcohol and drug use, mental health issues, violence and risky sexual activity.
2. These risk are enhanced by social determinants over which this age group has little control.

3. Disengaging/feeling disengaged from schools and communities seems to increase the risk and this does seem to be something they have control over.
4. Comprehensive approaches focusing on resiliency and the promotion of protective factors are more likely to change behaviour than focusing on risk factors.
5. Research into youth engagement as a protective factor is currently demonstrating that it is key to enhancing resiliency and improving health outcomes.
6. There are numerous organizations doing this research including governments and universities. Guidelines/principles are available from these groups about the best ways to support youth engagement in schools and in communities.
7. Less common are on-the-ground programs that support resiliency according to these principles especially those that address illicit drug use
8. Most drug education programs are not effective in reducing drug use.
9. There is a need for more research into programs and policies in schools and communities that support resiliency, youth engagement and the reduction of risk-taking behaviours including alcohol and other drug use. Promising programs in schools and communities are included in the report
10. Youth must be included as key partners in any initiative or approach - not just as recipients of programs or as token spokespeople.

Evidence-based programming for this age group addressing the specific criteria for inclusion is limited. Some of the more promising programs are:

In schools

- Comprehensive Youth Pilot Project CYPP – Toronto Public Health
- School-aged Children and Youth (SACY) Alcohol and Other Drugs Prevention Initiative – Vancouver Coastal Health
- Gatehouse Project – Centre for Adolescent Health, Victoria, Australia

In communities

- Communities That Care – United States and Canada
- Tiny Giant/The Students’ Commission – Canada
- YACshops – McCreary Centre Society, British Columbia

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

- Within the scope of this project, Public Health professionals in Ontario have the opportunity to reach “at-risk” youth (youth at-risk of disengaging from school or community) with youth engagement activities in either the school or the community through already identified and evaluated processes, programs, and /or strategies **and** to expand the research into reducing risk-taking behaviours.
- A key challenge is the time allotted to this project and school/community readiness is essential for success.

- The evaluation strategy and projected outcomes for success should reflect this challenge.
- PH professionals will need guidance and mentoring by OPHA to achieve the outcomes. The training day, Tool Kit, website and ongoing support are essential for success.
- PH professionals need to understand, accept and follow the principles of “authentic” youth engagement and follow the guidelines developed by OPHA for successful youth engagement programs.