



Promising Practices:

Influencing policy

Fourth R Overview

The Fourth R includes a range of healthy relationships programming that have been shown to promote positive peer interactions and reduce dating and peer violence. There are many different programming components for different grades, as well as community-based versions. Some of the recent program components have a particular emphasis on promoting positive mental health. In addition, we have developed strengths-based programming that is uniquely designed to meet the needs of Indigenous youth, LGBT2Q+ youth, and vulnerable youth. Between 2010 and 2018 we were funded through the Innovation Strategy of the Public Health Agency of Canada. Across three project phases we developed new programming components, evaluated programs, made regional adaptations, and scaled up nationally. By 2018 Fourth R programs were implemented in more than 5000 schools and community organizations nationally.

Policy

The Fourth R team had opportunity to influence policy in a number of ways over the course of our Innovation Strategy project. Our National Education Coordinator was a member of the Ontario Safe Schools Action Team that developed several foundational reports to drive provincial policy. The report, *Safe Schools Policy and Practice: An Agenda for Action*, identified areas for taking action on school safety, including prevention, progressive or graduated discipline, parent and community involvement, and developing programs for students who have been suspended or expelled. The action team also released a report entitled, *Shaping Safer Schools: A Bullying Prevention Action Plan*. The report made several important recommendations on how to make Ontario's schools safer through comprehensive, province-wide bullying prevention programs. It was based on consultations across Ontario with educators, police, parents, students, student advocates, youth and children's services workers, health care professionals, existing bullying prevention groups and others.

Our National Education Coordinator also supported the Northwest Territories Department of Education to undertake consultation and prepare its first Safe Schools legislation. The Regulations created directed every school to develop Safe and Caring School Plans that abide by the Territorial School Code of Conduct, and contain: Policies and Procedures; Prevention and Education; Intervention and Support Strategies; and a Monitoring, Evaluation and Assessment Plan. In addition he provided support to the Department of Education and all Superintendents during the implementation of the new legislation.

The purpose of this summary is to identify promising practices for influencing policy. It is one of eight issue-specific summaries designed to share actionable, positive strategies to improve the effectiveness of mental health promotion and violence prevention efforts.



Promising Practices

Engage policy makers at different levels.

When we hear the word policy, we automatically tend to think of provincial or federal policy. However, policy happens at many levels and in different organizations, and each of those can help support evidence-based practice. We have been able to help shape policy within local school boards as well as provincially or territorially. We have also engaged specific groups who can help support evidence-based practice through their policy, such as when the Religious Education Network of Alberta endorsed the Fourth R for use in Catholic schools in that province. Local influence may be particularly important when provincial or federal policy swings in ways that might not support evidence-based approaches to healthy youth relationships.

Align with the mandates and needs of policy makers.

Evidence-based healthy relationships programming can be framed in different ways because it is a comprehensive approach that promotes a range of healthy behaviours. One way to garner support among policymakers is to show the alignment between healthy relationships programs and their individual mandates, whether those are violence prevention, comprehensive sexual health education, mental health promotion, or bullying prevention. At the federal level, it is important to align with the mandate letter of a particular Minister, since that document outlines the scope of their objectives.

Develop relationships with policy makers.

Developing personal relationships with policy makers at different levels increases the likelihood that you will be seen as a credible source of information. As with other relationships, it is important to respond to requests promptly, be respectful when you disagree, and show gratitude when you feel individuals have made evidence-based decisions. These relationships can be fostered by maintaining contact through regular (but not overly frequent) communication and sending along important updates or resources. In addition, governments change and Ministers change (sometimes frequently). In some circumstances, we have been able to help support government staff through these transitions to help work plans stay on track.

Be nimble with respect to opportunities to influence policy.

Often opportunities to influence policy emerge quickly and within a limited timeframe. These openings are at inopportune times with respect to other project deadlines and workload, but all efforts should be made to prioritize providing input to policymakers. Knowing your key messages ahead of time means you can take advantage of openings without having to start developing your communications after a particular request.

Provide information at the level of detail policy makers require.

As researchers, we can get buried in details and caveats. Policymakers typically are looking for high level information. We need to be clear about our key messages and able to provide detail as requested, but not overwhelm policymakers with lengthy, overly detailed documents.