Knowledge into Action
Action into Knowledge

School Mental Health Ontario / Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario   Western   Centre for School Mental Health

Developing and Sustaining Effective Partnerships

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Innovation and Scale Up Lab Overview

The Innovation and Scale Up Lab's (ISU Lab) mission is to examine and advance evidence-based and implementation-sensitive approaches within school mental health, and to mobilize both research and practice evidence to enhance quality, consistency, scalability, and sustainability in Ontario schools. To move this agenda forward, the ISU Lab aims to:

- Seek out promising research and practice examples

- Partner with key stakeholders to ensure that proposed innovations meet a clear and specific need

- Study innovations to ensure that promising approaches are evidence-based and implementation-sensitive within the context of Ontario

- Share lessons from promising approaches and engage in related knowledge mobilization and dissemination

Projects

These promising practices were drawn from ISU Lab individual case studies stemming from the following projects:

Tier One, Universal Mental Health Promotion
- Everyday Mental Health (EDMH)
- Faith and Wellness (F&W)
- Bell Let's Talk in the Classroom
- Skills4Life Career Studies SEL (S4L)

Tier Two, Prevention and Early Intervention
- Brief Intervention for School Clinicians (BRISC)
- Supporting Transition Resilience of Newcomer Groups (STRONG)

Purpose

The purpose of this information sheet is to highlight lessons learned and promising practices in developing and sustaining effective relationships with partners from across ISU Lab projects.

Developing and Sustaining Effective Partnerships

Throughout these projects described in the case studies, School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) worked closely with diverse partners across the province. Some of these partnerships were based on previous working relationships, and others were new. SMH-ON partnered with school boards, teachers' unions, community agencies, postsecondary educations, policymakers and other researchers.

These partners provided a critical provincial network that led to the development of ISU Lab projects and resources. The individual case studies from these projects identified numerous promising practices described below as a critical foundation for developing and sustaining effective partnerships.

Shared Strategic Vision
A key strategy in developing partnerships is to show partners how a shared strategic vision across partnering organizations aligns with their particular mandate. The co-development of the Everyday Mental Health (EDMH) resource is an example of how a shared vision results in equitable control over the process of achieving common objectives, with each partner contributing towards the end goals and benefiting from the partnership.

"The development of the EDMH resource aligned with both SMH-ON's vision for school mental health and ETFO's focus on prioritizing its members' expertise in developing resources that fit with students' needs. Subsequent to the co-development of this resource, the work continues. Various efforts are being made to further refine and integrate EDMH practices into routine daily teaching practices. Below we provide examples of these efforts." - EDMH Case Study (p.19)

Co-Development With Partners

Co-development is crucial to a successful collaborative partnership among organizations as collaboration enables various voices to offer different perspectives. It also allows partnering organizations to learn from each other and increase their knowledge and skills to benefit the partnership.

Since SMH-ON values the involvement of intended audiences in the co-creation of resources, multiple partnerships were sought to develop the Faith and Wellness: A Daily Mental Health Resource (F&W) to build on the EDMH resource and adapt it to link to the Catholic Faith seamlessly.

"The development, evaluation, and implementation of the F&W resource was made possible through collaboration between multiple stakeholders and organizations, including SMH-ON, OECTA, ETFO, York University, and Brock University. This collaboration enabled a variety of voices to offer different perspectives, allowing the team to learn from each other and increase their knowledge and skills to benefit the teachers and students in Ontario's Catholic schools."
– F&W Case Study (p.20)

What is significant about this type of partnership is that it allowed teachers to create a research-based resource for other teachers and a chance to create buy-in as champions of a resource that is highly relevant to them.

Collaborative Communication Strategy

All partners have distinct decision making-process and language, and it is essential to understand these from the beginning. It is important to engage decision-makers within each organization from the onset and establish a proactive intentional communication strategy with regularly scheduled meetings. This will ensure that information is disseminated effectively in ways that work best for different partners and their stakeholder groups.

"SMH-ON and ETFO representatives met throughout the project, starting in the fall of 2016. Consensus building on the desired goals, project operations, desired resource(s), and involvement of key stakeholders were prioritized. Next, SMH-ON and ETFO found common ground on how to field test and pilot the resource. They also established an agreed-upon communication strategy. The planning phase, which included the sharing of the resource, lasted two years." – EDMH Case Study (p.15)

Clear Roles and Responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities within a new partnership must be clearly defined. It is important to recognize that each partner has their own mandate and accountabilities within their respective organizational structures. It takes time for partners to build trust and understand each other's mandates, priorities, leadership structures, organizations and who they serve.

> *"Successful implementation of school-based interventions requires knowledge of the education system and related initiatives, understanding of the school environment, and successful engagement of stakeholders, including credible and influential champions. In this project, the partnership with OSSTF and SMH-ON allowed SRDC to understand and plan for a wide range of contexts and delivery constraints." - S4L Case Study (p.19)*

Adaptable Timelines

It's imperative to set mutually agreed-upon timelines. However, these need to be flexible to allow for coordination between partners and the different levels of approval required within each organization. Timelines also need to be revisited often during regularly scheduled, in-person leadership meetings to build relationships and keep the project on track while meeting the needs of each partner.

> *"Across school boards, research application processes differ widely, and the sequencing of approvals is tricky. University approval is required before a school board is approached. If a school board requests even a minor change, the changes must be approved by the university ethics committee as an amendment. This back and forth can lead to multiple versions of the same consent form. In some cases, research departments seemed to conflate the intervention with the research and rejected the research application because of objections to the intervention (which had already been adopted by their board's mental health leaders). During the 2019-2020 school year, challenges with contract negotiations made research application processes even more difficult; many boards suspended their review processes completely."   - STRONG Case Study (p.12)*

Responsive to Feedback

As part of the co-creation process, partners are often asked for feedback at different stages of a project. It is crucial for partners to see that the actionable feedback received from users gets reflected in the project's latest iteration. Conversely, if

feedback is not being integrated, then the rationale for that decision should be shared.

"Following the end of the pilot project in June 2019, the research team compiled and reviewed information and feedback from participants. This data informed changes to the resource. A small group of teachers made edits and revisions to the resource during the summer months of 2019. To further evaluate the resource, a more rigorous evaluation was planned for the 2019-2020 school year." – F&W Case Study (p.12)

Research and Resources

- **Innovation and Scale Up Lab Case Studies**
  - Available at: https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/smho-lab/resources.html