THE SOCIETY FOR
Safe and Caring
SCHOOLS & COMMUNITIES

Environmental Scan of "Safe and Caring" Practices, Programs & Policies in Alberta

Key Findings

June 2015

PARENTS, SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES AGREE that helping children and youth engage in and maintain healthy relationships is an important and common concern. As social learning environments, schools are ideally positioned to help build these skills and relationships. However, schools face many challenges within the current landscape, including competing pressures to promote both academic and social outcomes, fragmented and uncoordinated programming, and lack of resources.

Recognizing the need for an enhanced and coordinated collective effort to encourage healthy relationships and foster safe and caring learning environments, Safe and Caring has conducted an environmental scan and stakeholder consultation to identify existing programs and supports and better understand the needs of educators, schools and school systems in Alberta regarding healthy relationships and bullying prevention. These findings reflect the current state of safe and caring practices, programs and policies across Alberta.

1. **No common language:** There is a need for building a shared understanding and common language around bullying and safe and caring environments. Even though the revised School Act provides a definition of bullying, findings indicate that bullying terminology is being applied by teachers, parents and programmers to a wide range of behaviour which may or may not be "bullying." School district definitions tend to vary, particularly around bullying, while safe and caring definitions are often vague and require clarification.

2. **Over-reliance on programs:** Overwhelmingly, stakeholders feel that programs have a limited scope in creating safe and caring school environments. Programs are considered too limited in efforts to address a multi-faceted and complex issue like safe and caring schools. However, many schools turn to programs because they offer a concrete and time-limited solution.

3. **Schools are overwhelmed:** As a key focal point for addressing a wide range of community issues (e.g., poverty, pregnancy, gangs, mental health, etc.), schools are bombarded by requests from community stakeholders, on top of facing immense pressure to achieve academic outcomes. Safe and caring practices and initiatives are often viewed as add-ons to an already stretched system. Stakeholders believe that ensuring that school and system personnel such as principals, superintendents and policy makers are aware of the link between safe and caring environments and positive outcomes will bring more attention and effort towards implementing safe and caring practices.

4. **Fragmented approaches:** There is an immense breadth and depth of resources and programs available to support Alberta schools and school districts in building safe and caring environments. However, many that do come into schools, do so without collaboration, in an uncoordinated, haphazard way. Often, programs or resources do not successfully meet schools' needs, and in some cases, schools have not been able to deliver resources effectively, due to issues such as time constraints.

5. **Limited capacity:** Although stakeholders recognize the importance of using high-quality resources and programming, there is a lack of capacity and experience in Alberta schools to discern quality evidence, as well as a lack of time to look for quality evidence-based programming. Building the capacity for school staff to understand and implement the appropriate approaches, practices, resources or programming is critical.

6. **Lack of strategic collaborative planning:** Safe and caring efforts in schools by teachers and administrators are often individual and unconnected. Resources could be used more effectively and greater system change could occur if school districts were working as a whole to develop plans around safe and caring school environments.

7. **Lack of consistent policy development and implementation across Alberta:** There are a wide variety of policies in place to support safe and caring learning environments. However, there is an unmet need for support in order to successfully implement these policies.