

Parliamentary inquiry into the potential for developing opportunities for schools to become a focus for promoting healthy community living

**Submission by
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1. Specific health promotion programs

What health promotion programs (if any) has your organisation run for schools (or a school)?

Dental Health Services Victoria has a long history of health promotion in Victorian schools. Recent examples include:

- The smiling schools project
- School nurses project – *The Mouth: Oral Health Information for Primary School Nurses*
- Defenders of the tooth – Interactive website

The smiling schools project

In 2006-7, Dental Health Services Victoria (DHSV) developed and distributed an oral health literacy survey to a sample of Victorian Primary School children and their parents. The randomly selected sample included government and Catholic primary schools across metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria. Eleven schools consented to participate in the study.

The main aim of the project was to explore the oral health literacy of Victorian primary school children and their parents, an area where there was little available literature. The project also aimed to determine the relationships between oral health literacy, oral health practices and oral health knowledge to establish a bench mark against which the effectiveness of oral health promotion initiatives could be evaluated, and to examine population awareness of the key messages of the *Oral Health Guidelines for Victorians* (Department of Human Services Victoria 2003). The results are outlined later in this submission.

The school nurses project

A resource manual titled *The Mouth: Oral Health Information for Primary School Nurses* was designed to support and guide primary school nurses to promote good oral health and prevent disease. Early detection and intervention in health issues are key to the role of the primary school nurse. They are well placed to promote oral health for young children through their regular visits to schools and health assessment of school entrants.

Defenders of the Tooth

The *Defenders of the Tooth* interactive website and resources were developed to engage children with the key messages of the *Oral Health Guidelines for Victorians*. The key oral health messages of "Eat Well, Drink Well and Clean Well" were used in the development of the oral health super-heroes, the *Defenders of the Tooth*. The characters also carry the messages on dental visits, healthy habits and safe play.

The *Defenders of the Tooth Adventure Playground* at www.dhsv.org.au/defenders was developed in 2008 and provides children with a fun and interactive way to learn about oral health through games, educational activities and information. Fact sheets for parents and tip cards also accompany the program.

What health promotion programs (if any) has your organisation run for the wider community?

Dental Health Services Victoria primarily focuses oral health promotion initiatives on three target groups:

- 1) Children aged 0-5 (under primary school age)
- 2) Older adults
- 3) People with special needs.

Many of DHSV's oral health promotion programs focus on promoting oral health practices and increasing the oral health promotion skills of primary health care and education professionals working with these groups.

Such programs include:

- *Smiles 4 Miles*
- Maternal & child health nurses project – *TEETH - Oral Health Information for Maternal & Child Health Nurses*
- Pension-level supported residential services oral health initiative.

Smiles 4 Miles

Smiles 4 Miles is an initiative of DHSV which works in partnership with local agencies (Primary Care Partnerships, local governments and community health services) to improve the oral health of young children in the community. *Smiles 4 Miles* targets children under school age and families at high risk of developing oral disease and complements programs that work with disadvantaged communities, such as Neighbourhood Renewal and Best Start.

The program began in 2004 and is currently coordinated in thirty-four local agencies throughout metropolitan and regional Victoria. This ensures a local approach to the implementation of the program

The foundation of *Smiles 4 Miles* is based on the World Health Organisation's Ottawa Charter and the health promoting schools framework with the aim of promoting life long oral and general health across all sectors of the community. The program encourages healthy eating and drinking habits in children and their families through:

- the use of simple messages: eat well, drink well, clean well
- increasing community knowledge of oral health
- educating workers in early childhood settings
- engaging parents and staff
- creating environments that support healthy choices
- embedding oral health messages into the early childhood curriculum and
- developing sustainable partnerships that foster healthy communities.

Smiles 4 Miles and *Kids – 'Go for your life'* have an agreement to work in partnership where appropriate.

Maternal and child health nurses project

A resource manual titled "*TEETH – Oral Health Information for Maternal & Child Health Nurses*" was developed to assist Victorian maternal & child health nurses in their health promotion, disease prevention, early detection and intervention role. It encouraged maternal & child health nurses to conduct mouth checks and to identify oral health problems.

Pension-level support residential services oral health initiative

The pension-level supported residential services (SRS) project provides residents and staff of all 72 pension-level SRS facilities across Victoria with oral health resources and instruction. The first stage of the project involved the distribution of oral health resource kits – containing toothpaste, a toothbrush, dental floss and a brochure to all residents and managing staff. The second stage delivered information sessions on the importance of oral health to residents.

How successful have these programs been? How has their success been measured?

The smiling schools project was an exploration of the oral health literacy of a representative sample of Victorian primary school children and their parents and has resulted in a deeper understanding and the development of a ratified definition of oral health literacy.

The findings of the project highlighted significant differences between sub-groups (culturally and linguistically diverse CALD communities, new arrivals to Australia, and people of low socio-economic status) in key dimensions of oral health literacy, oral health knowledge and oral health practices which need to be taken into account for future work.

The project team, led by DHSV in collaboration with research staff from the School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University stated in their recommendations that the project can provide the basis for future, ongoing work and will contribute to the evidence-base for oral health literacy, for population monitoring and will guide and inform specific program development (DHSV, 2007)

The school nurses project was well received and found that occupational demands can present time barriers to the incorporation of oral health into their work but that the development of partnerships between dental service and community health providers was valuable (Wright, Satur et al. 2006).

The Smiles 4 Miles program has established mutually beneficial partnerships with local organizations and services. The program has been coordinated with thirty four local agencies (including councils, community health services and primary care partnerships) and has been implemented in over three hundred and fifty early childhood settings.

An independent evaluation undertaken in 2006 identified local ownership and engagement as strengths of the program. Further evaluation focusing on program impacts will commence 2009-10 (DHSV, 2006)

Are you aware of any other especially successful health promotion programs for schools or communities, from within Australia or overseas?

The Cancer Council's SunSmart program has been very successful. The majority of Victorian primary schools are registered members of the SunSmart schools program. Evidence shows that schools with a sun protection policy are more likely to have measures in place to protect students and staff from the harmful effects of the sun. Many schools have addressed the lack of shade in their playgrounds by altering their environment and either planting trees or installing shade structures.

The Stephanie Alexander kitchen garden program encourages school aged children to enjoy growing and preparing healthy fresh food. The children help design, build and maintain a vegetable garden. They also have classroom lessons in the kitchen preparing meals from their produce. The aim of the program is pleasurable food education for children. The program develops lifelong skills in the kitchen and garden and encourages children to enjoy the benefits of growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing food.

Kids, Go For Your Life is a collaborative program between Diabetes Australia – Vic and The Cancer Council of Victoria. The program aims to improve the health of Victorian children aged 0-12 years. It supports family day care schemes, child care services, kindergartens and Primary schools to create environments where children can enjoy healthy eating and active play every day. DHSV's *Smiles 4 Miles* and *Kids – 'Go for your life'* have an agreement to work in partnership where appropriate.

2. The role of schools in promoting healthy community living

Do you believe schools should have a role in promoting healthy living in the wider community? Why or why not?

Yes, schools are ideally placed for encouraging students, families and the community to develop and maintain healthy choices. Schools are often a central focal point for a community and should play a role in promoting healthy community living.

Initiatives in schools such as encouraging children to limit their rubbish in their lunch boxes have had some anecdotal success. Parents are encouraged to reduce their impact on the environment and limit the use of plastic wrap and bags instead opting for reusable containers. This is an example of a simple message successfully communicated to children and parents in the school environment. This then has the potential to extend the recycling message beyond that setting.

If schools are to have such a role, what models or mechanisms could they use?

Health Promoting Schools Framework – Schools are in an ideal position to promote and maintain the health of children, young people, school staff and the wider community. The Health Promoting Schools Framework is based on the principles of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986) and was initiated by the World Health Organisation.

A health promoting school is one that is based on a social model of health. This model takes into account the physical, and social and emotional needs of all members of the school community.

Health Promoting Schools:

- strengthen families by encouraging their involvement in the management of the school and their participation in the development of health skills and knowledge of their children
- maximize the opportunity of the physical environment to contribute to the health of those involved with the school

- maximize the potential of the school culture to contribute to a supportive learning environment in which healthy relationships and the emotional wellbeing of students are valued and strengthened
- promote active student participation in the formal curriculum and decision making process in the school to develop a range of lifelong health-related skills, attitudes and knowledge
- enhance equity in education and health by raising the health competencies of all members of the school community
- provide a positive and supportive working environment for paid and unpaid workers in the school.
- enable the school and the local community to collaborate in health initiatives to benefit school students, their families and community members. (Department of Human Services, SA, 2000)

How could health, education and other organizations work together more effectively to coordinate health promotion activities between communities and schools?

Many schools are involved in health promotion through various programs and initiatives some of which are already described. From a health professional's perspective it seems that schools with enthusiastic principals or parents and friends associations are more likely to adopt health promotion activities compared to others.

To increase the number of schools involved in health promotion activities there needs to be encouragement and support from the Department of Education and Training. Much has been said in the past about the 'crowded curriculum' so it is important that health promotion initiatives in schools are not labour intensive and are integrated into the curriculum and where necessary, draw on expertise and knowledge of others outside the school community.

Equally support from the Department of Human Services (DHS) would be most welcome to increase the involvement of health agencies. This could be done through DHS integrated health plans and increased school involvement with Primary Care Partnerships.

Health, education and other organisations need to work together in partnership towards mutual benefit. Formal partnerships need to be established with clear goals and expectations outlined from the beginning. This allows open channels of communication and information sharing.

Health promotion needs to be included in the curriculum of undergraduate teaching programs. Teachers should graduate with the expectation that promoting health is one of their many roles.

References

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Dental Health Services Victoria (2007). *The Smiling Schools Project Report*. Dental Health Services Victoria.

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World Health Organisation (1986) *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion*, Geneva

Web sites

Department of Education and Training - www.education.vic.gov.au

Dental health Services Victoria - www.dhsv.org.au/defenders

The Cancer Council Victoria – www.sunsmart.com.au

Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden – www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au

Go For Your Life – www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au