

The most effective and beneficial learning communities are ones that focus on children's wellness as well as their academics.

# The Science of Success

## Essential Elements for Cultivating a Healthy School Community

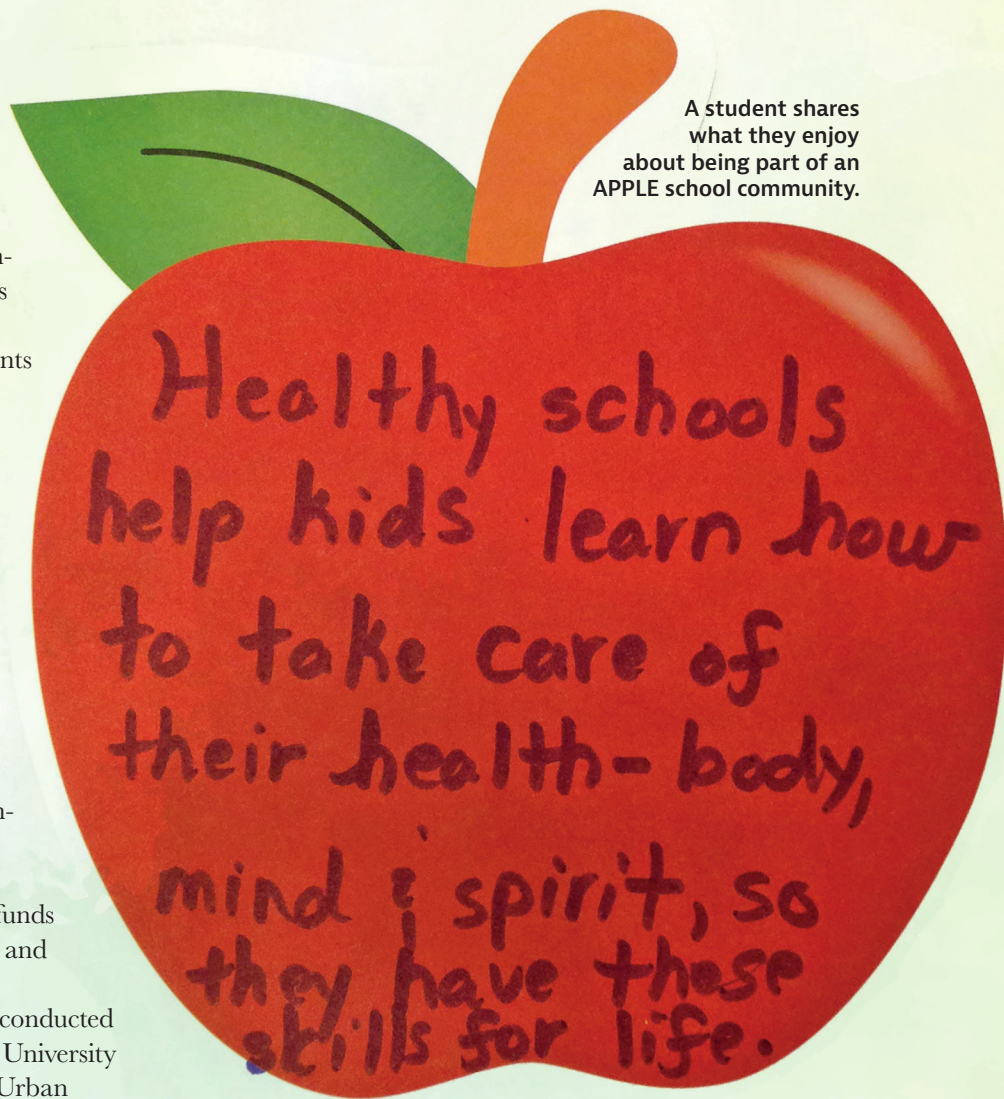
**Magdalena Pawlowski and Molly Bujold**  
APPLE Schools

Building a strong and vibrant school community is a vital component of fostering an environment where students thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. The APPLE Schools ([appleschools.ca](http://appleschools.ca)) health promotion project identifies eight essential elements that provide a steady formula for cultivating this environment. Backed by world-class research,<sup>1</sup> these essential elements yield remarkable results for supporting happier and healthier kids in underserved school communities.

APPLE Schools collaborates with 97 (and counting!) vulnerable school communities across Canada to improve students' lifelong wellness habits. We work with teachers, students, principals, parents, and community leaders to imagine their ideal healthy school community and equip them with the tools, knowledge, and funds required to center students' wellbeing and meet their goals.

The project is rooted in research conducted by the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta<sup>2</sup> and the MAP Centre for Urban

A student shares what they enjoy about being part of an APPLE school community.



FROM OUR ★  
*Readers*

*What has the Childhood Education Innovations publication meant to you?*

***“Milestones are to be celebrated. Childhood Education has consistently been in a position of leadership and innovation. The publication continues to reflect both best practices and timely discourse in our ever-changing society.”***

– Ruth Uhlmann

***“It has been very informative and enriching to take forward the child agenda in Africa.”***

– Mahendranath Busgopaul

***“It provides up-to-date information on current developments in early childhood. I like that the concept of play has become more the focus than rote learning. Children learn so much from having time to interact with others.”***

– Anonymous

Health Solutions at St. Michael’s Hospital in Toronto,<sup>3</sup> guaranteeing both its effectiveness and credibility. Students in APPLE school communities see a 35% increase in physical activity, eat 10% more fruit and veggies, have fewer mental health visits to the doctor in adolescent years, develop strong leadership abilities, and achieve higher learning outcomes.

So what makes the magic happen? When all eight essential elements are in place in the school community, along with ongoing mentorship and knowledge exchange opportunities, a healthy social and physical environment begins to form. Students and staff work harmoniously together to shift their school culture toward making the healthy choice the easy choice.

Here are APPLE Schools’ eight essential elements to create a healthy school community, in no particular order:

### **Element 1 - Comprehensive School Health Approach**

Comprehensive school health (CSH)<sup>4</sup> is an internationally recognized and effective approach for building healthy school communities through a holistic framework that integrates health promotion into all aspects of school policies, programs and the school environment.

It consists of four distinct yet interconnected components that, when working together harmoniously, generate numerous opportunities to support students in realizing their full potential as both learners and citizens.

The four components of CSH are:

- **Teaching and Learning**
- **Partnerships and Services**
- **Social and Physical Environments**
- **Policy**

Each APPLE school community creates and reviews an annual action plan outlining its healthy goals and its plan to reach them. Every plan should encompass these four CSH components in a way that makes sense to each unique school community. If, for example, your school wants to get more kids moving, consider how to physically engage students in class while meeting curriculum objectives, look at local businesses that might donate equipment, post bulletin boards in public spaces that promote movement, and always involve students and make it a fun experience!

*“As an APPLE (ally) school, we are intentionally looking at our activities to ensure every*



**A student checks on the plants in his school's growing dome, which was donated by a community partner.**

*aspect teaches students the importance of eating well, being active, and developing positive social connections. The holistic approach of Comprehensive School Health allows for an interconnection between physical, mental, and nutritional health.”* -Principal, Abbott School in Edmonton, Alberta

## Element 2 - Dedicated Champion

A unique element of the APPLE Schools model is the hiring of a trained in-school staff member as a school health facilitator (SHF). SHFs are enthusiastic community members who break the ice and lead the school’s shift toward wellness. They receive year-round support from an APPLE Schools mentor to engage students, parents, school staff, and community members in the development and implementation of a healthy school action plan. After three years, a volunteer school health champion (SHC), usually a teacher, takes over the role to maintain and build on the initiatives introduced by the SHF. Dedicated champions play a pivotal role in an APPLE school community, and are essential to making the healthy shift a sustainable venture so that a new group of students actively participates in the project every year.

*“The most rewarding aspect of my role is when staff and students create new healthy initiatives without my prompting. For example, a few staff members decided to start a ‘Wolves Day Wednesday’ to encourage a sense of school pride and improve mental wellness in the school.”* -School Health Champion, Anzac Bill Woodward School in Anzac, Alberta

## Element 3 - Students as Change Agents

Students are the heart of the APPLE Schools project. When they are involved in the change-making process, they are more likely to accept and promote change, engage with health promotion, and communicate CSH messages beyond school walls. We know that students are effective change agents at school and at home,<sup>5</sup> which is why adults in APPLE school communities strive to engage students to envision their ideal healthy



Images courtesy of APPLE Schools

**Student leaders explain to a group of adults touring the school about their many healthy initiatives, including the snack cart, which ensures that students have daily access to nutritious snacks. The snack cart is often prepared and distributed by students.**

school community, help to shape a plan to achieve it, and lead initiatives.

*“Our school lives the APPLE school commitment. It starts with the teachers in the classroom, but extends to the students. There are students that are part of the school’s APPLE leadership club that struggle in the classroom, but make strong leaders and are learning skills that will help them to be stronger mentally and physically for their futures. They are contributing as leaders and are positively influencing the school community.”* -Health Champion, Sakaw School in Edmonton, Alberta

## Element 4 - Administrative Leadership

A school principal is one of the most influential people when it comes to making the transition to a healthy community. Not only do they have the capacity to shift the paradigm, they also can lead others through commitment, role modeling, and action. A critical element to effective change is an administrator's support of shared leadership, ensuring that designated school health facilitators, parents, students, and staff all believe they can lead and affect results. APPLE Schools mentors meet with principals at the start and end of the school year to learn about school needs and share ways the principal can demonstrate qualities to support a healthy school.

*"APPLE Schools is not a program that we follow, but [rather] a philosophy that can be woven into our school's other priority areas so that health becomes just part of what is done in our community."* -Andrea Cooper, Principal, Abbott School in Edmonton, Alberta



**An APPLE school student takes part in traditional learning by making his own drum. Cultural education is just one way that schools can choose to promote wellbeing in a way that resonates with their students.**

## Element 5 - School Autonomy

A foundational principle of the APPLE Schools model is preserving the autonomy of each school so it can develop its own healthy community based on local needs. School autonomy is vital in building a sense of ownership over cultural changes in the school, making each APPLE school a unique space. Each school creates an action plan with health goals that are determined by considering the school's unique

data, and through consultation with the school community. The action plans get reviewed each year with an APPLE Schools mentor and are adjusted based on school data.

*"Elizabeth School organized an incredible learning opportunity for our students this January. Two community members shared their knowledge and skill in harvesting a moose and demonstrated the proper way of [butchering] this type of wild game. These experiences teach our pupils important life skills, a greater understanding of where their food comes from, insight into the anatomy of animals, and connection to their cultural roots of hunting and living off the land. Continuing to provide these opportunities for the youth of Elizabeth School improves understanding for active learners, develops environmental awareness, deepens a connection to the land as well as provides many mental health benefits."* -Principal, Elizabeth School in Elizabeth Métis Settlement, Alberta.



**A school principal helps a student prepare fruit for her classroom's taste test.**

## Element 6 - Professional Learning

Professional learning begins with training an SHF to provide health promotion expertise and connect targeted services and resources to the school community. Both SHFs and SHCs require initial and ongoing professional development. At APPLE Schools, a mentor meets regularly with the facilitators, either in person or remotely. Every year, APPLE Schools hosts two knowledge exchange events that bring together staff from our school communities. Here, they share successes and resources, address challenges, and ensure SHFs and SHCs feel competent and confident in leading healthy changes in their school communities.

*“APPLE Schools’ professional development opportunities are great. They’re helpful to meet with other teachers that work within similar school demographics. This allows us to get realistic solutions or ideas from one another that are more applicable to our school communities, which is not always the case with other professional development opportunities.”* -School Health Champion, Our Lady of Peace School in Edmonton, Alberta

## Element 7 - Dedicated Funding

Funding is pivotal for every school to initiate and uphold sustainable healthy practices. APPLE Schools provides funding to each school community for the first three years then decreases the amount. After the first three years, schools have developed partnerships that support their action plans in sustainable ways.

*“Funding is critical. It allows us to do many things for our students which we could not do otherwise: support a snack program, buy physical activity equipment to engage students, [hold] taste tests, and host a Fun Day. The funding is a great equalizer and it allows our staff to lead healthy changes in our school.”* -Principal, APPLE School Community



**Funding allows schools to purchase equipment, food, or extra curricular activities that will help them meet their healthy action plan goals, like engaging non-athletes in fun movement opportunities, such as skating.**

## Element 8 - Use of Evidence

Using evidence is essential for driving decisions and motivating change. Whether it is formal (conducted by outside research) or informal (e.g., students surveying other students), it has a significant impact on helping people buy into the concept of becoming a healthy school. For example, when a school survey points to the fact that many students are struggling with mental health, or getting almost no physical activity, it becomes imperative for the school community to find solutions to the facts.

*“[D]ata showed that in the first year of implementation, APPLE Schools had increased physical activity for fit children but had not affected the inactive students. So, we*

*refocused our efforts to engage the disengaged students and ask them what kind of activities they wanted to do. Suddenly, there were Girl Power and Boy Power activities at lunch, and Zumba and yoga began to appear in physical education, and students were excited.” -School staff member*

## How You Can Build a Healthy School Community

If you want to build a healthy school community based on the APPLE Schools model, there are plenty of best-practice resources available at no cost to help you get started. APPLE Schools’ robust resource webpage<sup>6</sup> offers plenty of tools, including an implementation guide for building a healthy school, digital learning modules, monthly campaigns to engage your school in various health topics, or energizers meant to keep kids moving in the classroom.

This process takes time, so don’t expect an immediate win overnight, and make sure you celebrate all successes along the way no matter how small they seem!

Visit [www.appleschools.ca](http://www.appleschools.ca) to learn more about this award-winning and internationally recognized model, or find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. APPLE schools is made possible by the generosity of private donors, foundations, and organizations<sup>7</sup> that want to make a proven difference in children’s lives.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> [www.appleschools.ca/files/Essential\\_Conditions\\_2.0.pdf](http://www.appleschools.ca/files/Essential_Conditions_2.0.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ualberta.ca/public-health/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://maphealth.ca/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://education.alberta.ca/comprehensive-school-health/?searchMode=3>

<sup>5</sup> [https://appleschools.ca/files/McKernan\\_et\\_al-2019-Canadian\\_Journal\\_of\\_Public\\_Health.pdf](https://appleschools.ca/files/McKernan_et_al-2019-Canadian_Journal_of_Public_Health.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://appleschools.ca/resource-section>

<sup>7</sup> <https://appleschools.ca/donors>

### APPLE Schools Social Media:

Facebook: APPLESchools.ca

X (Twitter): APPLESchools

Instagram: appleschools

LinkedIn: healthy-apple-schools

### Disclosure Statement:

The authors are employees of APPLE Schools.

## FROM OUR ★ Readers

What has the Childhood Education Innovations publication meant to you?

**Dear Editor,**

***I am honored to join in celebrating the 100th volume of Childhood Education Innovations. This is a significant milestone that speaks volumes about the dedication, resilience, and commitment of everyone involved in this remarkable publication.***

***Over the past century, Childhood Education Innovations has been a beacon of knowledge, shedding light on critical issues in child education and development. The articles explore solutions to specific challenges affecting schools, teachers, and learners and showcase the most recent innovations being developed and implemented to address those challenges. These resources have provided invaluable insights and innovative strategies that have significantly contributed to shaping the educational landscape worldwide.***

***In Nigeria, we have greatly benefited from the wealth of information shared through your publication. The insights gained have been instrumental in our work at the Dyslexia and Literacy Support Foundation, enabling us to better understand and address the unique educational needs of children.***

***As we celebrate this momentous occasion, it is my hope that Childhood Education Innovations will continue to inspire, inform, and influence educators, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners for many more years to come. Here’s to another century of innovation in childhood education!***

***Congratulations on your centennial celebration!***

— Agnes Gizo Kolo