

CORE CONNECTIONS

Creating Opportunities for Resilience and Engagement

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

SEPTEMBER 2010

What is CORE Connections?

CORE Connections is a research project to gather evidence on the short and longer term benefits of creating schools where children feel **safe, valued & connected**. We think there may be important health and learning outcomes, such as reductions in bullying, reductions in depression, and stronger engagement with learning.

CORE Connections is a **facilitated change process** that provides resources to the school in the form of a part-time facilitator, information, professional development & cash resources to spend on materials that assist the process. CORE Connections supports and creates changes in policies & practices that teachers, staff, parents & students feel could make the school better or more welcoming.

Practically speaking, it does not necessarily mean doing more things, but more likely, doing some things differently or legitimizing the emphasis placed on well-being that was there all along. CORE Connections is not highly packaged or prescriptive. It looks different in different schools.



CORE Connections fits with the values of the Calgary Catholic School Division which supports the creation of conditions that empower students for better learning. We expect to see more social inclusion, more mutual caring and courtesy, more friendship and improvements in self esteem. It complements and extends the footprint of Catholic Community of Caring.

How do schools get selected?

CORE Connections is a **'universal' intervention**. It is designed for all schools. Schools that face special needs or challenges will shape the opportunities provided by CORE Connections to suit their own needs.



What is the history of CORE Connections?

CORE Connections, as a whole-school intervention, was originally designed and evaluated in **Australia** (where it is called the Gatehouse Project). It had a huge and unprecedented effect on risk behaviours of early adolescents: 25% reductions in things like

Creating Opportunities for Resilience and Engagement

alcohol use, drug use and smoking. Moreover, this was achieved without having any focus on these factors at all - i.e., no new lectures about smoking in the health class, no guests coming in to the school to talk about drugs. Nothing.

The entire focus was on helping students feel more **safe, valued & connected** at school. Students were given opportunities and encouragement for more participation in the school community (decision making, activities & events). Also, how to handle and recognize emotions and deal respectfully with others was an embedded curriculum emphasis in the English classes and other subjects rather than the traditional “health” classes.

We adapted the approach to the **Alberta context** by replicating it in a rural high school. Here we added a teacher/workplace component and a stronger community focus. We further developed our understanding of the intervention in younger children with four elementary schools and one junior high school within the Calgary Board of Education. We have now teamed up with CCSD to take CORE Connections to the next level and test it over a three year period, comparing the results of schools who get CORE Connections with comparison schools that do not. That is the only way to get strong, unequivocal evidence about the effects. Then we will be able to advocate for CORE Connections to be an integral part of the work of all schools.

What happens in CORE Connections?

CORE Connections begins with confidential surveys with students to identify how students are feeling about themselves and their school. This is the first step in a cycle of survey -> feedback -> action -> survey.



Results are fed back to staff, students and parents to provide a **trigger for discussion and action** to bring about whole school change. A plan is created and implemented drawing on evidence-based strategies that operate at the classroom, curriculum, and whole school level. This cycle helps schools to work on issues to improve emotional well-being of students and then the research team measures the effectiveness of the actions taken.

So, together we will develop **local strategies** that will enhance feeling **safe, valued & connected** for all members of the school community - creating an inclusive, positive, social environment.



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Can schools do what schools want?

CORE Connections is a **school-led change process**, assisted by a part-time **facilitator**. A **school action team** is formed early in the process comprising students, staff and hopefully also parents. They choose priority areas for action. So, yes, in that sense schools do what schools want. Funds are provided to the school to release teachers for training and development sessions as interest and need for these unfolds or for other activities in keeping with CORE Connections goals (making everyone feel **safe, valued & connected**).

But you won't be sailing without a life boat. The research team has a lot of information and resources that the facilitator will provide the school to assist with the decision making. This is important, because there is evidence that some practices in schools, ostensibly to improve child well-being, are ineffective, or can even make things worse. There is no purpose or fun in reinventing the wheel either. So that is why lots of **guidance will be available** as required.

When it comes to the surveys and their timing and methods, we will consult with the school to ensure these fit smoothly with the timetable and class activities. We have had quite a bit of practice in this work now, so we appreciate that the last thing teachers want is disruption to the primary business of education.



How does CORE Connections work? It seems a bit too free-and-easy, maybe?!

How CORE Connections works is exactly what we are trying to uncover.

CORE Connections “works” if you trace the impact through to things like youth risk behaviours, as mentioned previously. Also, if you talk to schools that have had the opportunity to experience CORE Connections, they will talk about the changes that they see in the school ethos or climate. But exactly *how* that happens is the “black box” we want to get into. If we can crack that, we may be able to make CORE Connections stronger and more effective in all kinds of school contexts.

The effects that have been documented by the forerunning programs that we are building on are really impressive, and stronger than those interventions that rely on knowledge and skill building alone. It perhaps underlines an existing ethic in the school system about treating people as citizens and respecting their right to have a say in how things get done.

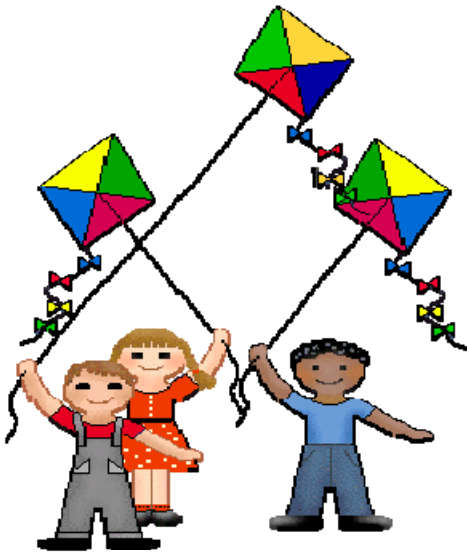
What else is left to show about CORE Connections?

As is often the case, research done & funded by the health sector is usually focused on **health effects**, but that is not enough. We want to be in position to demonstrate to Alberta Education that CORE Connections reduces things like absenteeism and vandalism and increases things like **school retention** and **test scores**. That way, policy makers are more likely to sit up and take notice.

Creating Opportunities for Resilience and Engagement

It is also getting increasingly important – and now possible – to show how social processes affect **processes at a biological level**. This provides a level of proof about the importance of social and emotional factors that can make a difference to those in charge of the purse strings. This is why we are planning to collect salivary samples from children, in order to show how being in a supportive social network at school is directly tied to a child's cortisol levels (stress response).

Finally, we wish to extend the reach of CORE Connections. The first time we ran CORE Connections in Canada, the high school we worked with said “Fine, but why don't you start with teachers first? Had you thought of that?” We hadn't. But it made sense for two reasons – first it meant that staff and teachers had some familiarity and experience with the survey-feedback-action cycle of CORE Connections themselves which helped when the focus was switched to the students. Second, the idea brought to the forefront the fact that **schools are workplaces**, and a truly ‘universal’ intervention should be about everyone, not just the students.



We would also like to better appreciate the school experience of children and families from other countries. CORE Connections was not specifically designed to cater for **different cultural groups** – but perhaps it can be tailored that way and be more socially inclusive. That's a particular feature we'd like to develop more strongly with advice from schools.

Why is research evidence needed?

On the one hand we should not need “hard evidence” to show policy makers that investing in socially supportive schools is worthwhile. It should be a core value or principle. On the other hand, without this type of evidence on hand, **investment in schools & programs can too easily become eroded**. We need to show that interventions or programs like CORE Connections are effective and these days we also need to prove that they are cost effective. We need evidence that is difficult for policy makers to ignore.

We take heed from the resurgence of provincial and pan-Canadian interest in early child development in recent years. Educators, psychologists, sociologists and social workers have always placed high importance on the right environment and stimulation in children's early life, ever since studies in the 1940s and 1950s showed what happens if young monkeys or rats are separated from the mothers, raised alone or put into crowded, harsh settings. But over the years, investments in pre-schools, childcare and children's services were badly eroded. The current resurgence of policy interest is due to these same development factors now being ‘rediscovered’ by neuroscientists – in brain development and so on. It seems that the **biological evidence** has a policy resonance that social science evidence does not.

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That is why CORE Connections research has expanded into the psycho-physiological domain. It is the responsible path to follow to ensure that more people take school environments seriously. The aim is to help insulate programs like CORE Connections in schools from budgetary neglect – across all school boards.

What will CORE Connections mean, day-to-day?

There will be a **CORE Connections facilitator** working part-time at the school. That person will spend time talking to staff, teachers, students and parents, convening meetings, holding briefings, anchoring or coordinating professional development activities, keeping notes, collating resources and providing guidance to a **CORE Connections school action team** – a group of parents/teachers/students that will meet about every two weeks to guide the CORE Connections process.

One of the most visible things will be during the **survey days** – when the **research team** will have students complete on-line surveys that are used to inform the CORE Connections process and measure its effect. These will be held three times during the school year, fitting in to the school schedule. The actual time taken in the survey itself is usually not more than one class period.



Interviews and **focus group** discussions may also be taking place, especially if the school agrees to spend time thinking about staff and teachers issues (improving school as a workplace) and also how to reach parents and children for whom English or French is not their first language. Parents will be asked to complete **consent forms** to enable their child to be part of the CORE Connections data collection procedures. **Staff meetings** and **professional development activities** might have components directly related to CORE Connections material (e.g., reviewing and discussing survey results and deciding what action to take, if required).

Some **new activities at the school** might also take place.



What are the ethics of this project? Can we refuse to take part?

Yes. The ethics operate at two levels. At the **school consent** level the principal acts as the voice of the school to the University on whether your school gets involved in CORE Connections or not. That is why the initial briefing meetings are taking place so that the principal can get a sense of whether the school is interested and keen to be involved over the next 3 years.

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The other level is **individual consent**. While the whole school will experience CORE Connections, if the school agrees to move forward with it, involvement in the research (the data collection) requires each person to give consent at an individual level (or each parent on behalf of their child). This is a private matter and confidential. It is governed by the rules and requirements of the Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary and Educational Research at the Calgary Catholic School District.

That said, while consent is private and individual, it's very important that **consent rates** are high - at least 70% or better. This is because evidence about the effectiveness, or otherwise, of CORE Connections is invalidated if we cannot get enough data from enough people to form an accurate picture. One of the worries of this field is that the parents who are perhaps least likely to send back the consent forms (parents with lower education or parents from countries outside of Canada) are the ones whose children need CORE Connections most. But if we don't have consent forms from their parents, we cannot include these children in the surveys. As a result we forgo the vital chance to show that CORE Connections helps these children.

Who is the research team?

We are researchers at the **Population Health Intervention Research Centre (PHIRC)** located in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Calgary (see www.ucalgary.ca/PHIRC). Our **mission** is to provide the evidence that policy makers need to put more resources into prevention. Research in the Centre is aimed primarily at improving the effectiveness of interventions designed to improve population health.

Our **school research team** has seven years experience in working with schools with a facilitated intervention (CORE Connections) that improves perceived school climate and increases the cohesiveness of student and staff social networks.



The chief investigator on CORE Connections is **Dr. Penny Hawe**. The part-time **CORE facilitators** are **Louise Seguin** and **Marta Albertin**. **Rosemary Perry** is our survey field manager and **Anita Blackstaffe** is our data analyst. **Dr. Alan Shiell** will be helping us work out what CORE Connections costs in preparation for a cost effectiveness analysis in future years. There are another five researchers working with us, as well as extra assistants on school survey days.

What else will the research team be tracking?

We would like to look at learning and educational data along with health, social and emotional factors. We need to see how the long term impact of CORE Connections could be traced through **educational datasets**. We won't be testing children ourselves. It's more a matter of looking to use the

Creating Opportunities for Resilience and Engagement

administrative data that is already collected in useful ways to evaluate CORE Connections. We cannot and would not seek to get individual data about any child – it's the **aggregate data** for the whole school that is of interest. We will be spending time in the first 6 months or so getting a sense of the school's ideas about this and what kinds of data that are already collected that could be used to tell the story of the impact of CORE Connections.



Isn't saliva collection a bit intrusive?

Actually, feedback from other studies where this is done is that the children enjoy the novelty. They don't get to "spit" exactly. Saliva will be collected through 'passive drool', meaning that students will collect saliva under their tongue and then will dribble the saliva into a small plastic tube. There is standard protocol to follow to preserve hygiene and the integrity of the sample taken. The method has been **used in school research for many years**. If the research is seen to be for a good reason, parents happily give consent. Of course **confidentiality** is strictly maintained. No personally identifying information is kept on the sample, and it is only used for the cortisol assessment purpose, nothing else. The ethics governance in the Faculty of Medicine is very strict on this.

What happens when CORE Connections ends?

In our experience, schools that have had CORE Connections have been **successful in attracting new funds** for new programs because CORE Connections enables capacity to identify needs, make plans and show a "track record" in achieving benefits to children and youth.

CORE Connections itself is **maintained** in the ongoing procedures, policies and processes at the school, in the school ethos and in the way people uphold the importance of emotional needs of children.

The experience of the Gatehouse project (on which CORE Connections is based) was that the intervention's effects were even stronger in the next generation of students at the Gatehouse schools after the facilitators left the school. This was because the project seemed to 'bed down' or get **institutionalized into the school's daily routine**.



What might we see as a result of CORE Connections in 3 years at our school?

Based on pilots in other schools – and they all had different starting places – you will see changes in the **activities, processes & climate** of the school. People told us how CORE Connections helped to improve the climate or feel of the school. They talked about changes in student behaviour and wider factors like parental participation in school events. In some cases CORE Connections meant greater legitimacy, status or authority being given to people and activities in the school already directed to making students (and staff and teachers) feel **safe, valued & connected**. That meant a lot.

The research team has documented statistically significant changes in the **social networks** of students – more inclusiveness, more friendships and fewer socially isolated students.



The research team has also measured things like depression, self esteem and anxiety among children and risk taking behaviours of various sorts. To show

meaningful, statistically significant improvements in these we need lots of students at a single school as well as data from lots of schools.

Where can we hear more about CORE Connections from schools who have experienced it?

We can arrange for you to share ideas with other schools who took part in early pilots of CORE.



For further information, please contact:

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Population Health Intervention Research Centre (PHIRC)

A CIHR Centre for Research Development in Population Health