

Building Confidence and Connection

Overcoming barriers to participate in after school programs

At the end of the school day at Harwin Community School in Prince George, you won't see many students rushing out the doors. Harwin students stay after school to participate in a variety of on-site programs including Frozen Warriors (a group training for the Prince George Iceman competition of skiing, running, skating, and swimming), a mural project, volleyball, floor hockey, and more. Harwin students showcased their programs last month during a [visit](#) from the Minister of Community, Sport and Cultural Development.

The topic of after school programming has gained significance across Canada in recent years. The [Canadian Active After School Partnership](#) has an online hub focused on after school programming. Provincial investments in after school programs exist in several provinces, including [Ontario](#), [Manitoba](#), and [Alberta](#). British Columbia is no exception. The BC [After School Sport and Arts Initiative](#) (ASSAI), funded through the Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development in partnership with the Public Health Agency of Canada, supports over 150 schools (including Harwin) in 30 communities around the province to deliver high-quality, safe, and accessible programming for students in Grades K-8.

After school programming can provide students with many [benefits](#), including increased confidence, greater engagement in learning, and improved cooperation with peers. McKenna, a Harwin student, explained that her school's programs help with sportsmanship, help students "gain self-confidence and self-esteem, and help [them] connect with friends and staff members."

For many students, unfortunately, there are barriers preventing or limiting participation in after school activities. Program fees may be too high. The student may have no way of getting to and from the program, especially in rural communities where the school bus is frequently the only way home. Small or remote communities may not have swimming pools or community centres. In some cases, students may need to go home to care for younger siblings; in others, a student may be nervous in a group setting or lacking confidence to participate in a sport or create artworks.

ASSAI programs are designed to reach students who face barriers to participation. DASH has been a key partner in the ASSAI since 2011. DASH's role has been to support school districts in delivering programs, bring relevant educational contexts to the program and to collect feedback on how barriers to participation can be reduced. Over the past three years, school districts have used a variety of approaches to engage students in after school programs and keep them excited so they will come back week after week. Several key themes were discovered:

- **Make programming accessible**
 - Offer programs that are free or low-cost.
 - Hold programming on school grounds, so students don't need transportation to participate, they can just walk down the hall. Where necessary, provide transportation home (e.g., through partnerships with school district buses).
 - Keep registration simple and assist families with filling out forms where needed.
 - Provide drop-in programs so students and families don't feel pressure to commit to a specific schedule.

- **Hold programming in the school**
 - Students and their families are comfortable with the school environment.
 - Holding programming in schools strengthens connections between students, families, and school staff. Students meet kids in other grades, know more adults at school, and see school as a space for recreation in addition to learning.
 - Partner with local recreation, sport or arts organizations and build the school’s relationship with the community. [Shared-used agreements](#) help to create strong partnerships.
- **Draw students in**
 - Make it fun! Ask students what activities they’re interested in.
 - Provide a nutritious snack. Food is always a good motivator for participation!
 - Create spaces where students feel welcome and confident enough to participate. Offer non-competitive activities or projects that focus on the process and not the end-product.
- **Invest in skilled program leaders**
 - Provide leaders with training in children’s recreation programming (e.g., [High Five](#)), teaching fundamental movement skills (e.g., [Run Jump Throw](#), [Coaches BC](#)), or working with [diverse](#) student groups or challenging [behaviours](#).
 - Include a ‘person of rapport’, a leader whose role is to develop trust with students and oversee behaviour management.

While these strategies may not work in every school or every community, using even a few of them can create opportunities for more students and contribute to a healthy school community. For Harwin student Keiannah, participating in ASSAI programming at school “makes me feel like I’m a part of something and it doesn’t feel like I’m alone.”

For more information on the After School Sport and Arts Initiative, click [here](#).

Author:

Rebecca Haber. Rebecca works at DASH BC as the Community Engagement Liaison with school districts taking part in the After School Sport and Arts Initiative.