# Influencing policy and practice with research

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BACKGROUND

- To the extent that researchers practice linkage and exchange with policy makers and practitioners, they can influence both public policy making and delivery of "on the ground" services

- Our own experiences in linking with decision-makers and disseminating findings from numerous studies indicate that the early and ongoing involvement of decision-makers promotes research use

- Knowledge exchange can drive the full cycle of idea conception, knowledge creation, synthesis, dissemination and uptake

- Our approach is based on strong collaborative research partnerships between academics and community leaders, such as those in our *Understanding the Early Years in Saskatoon* study (UEY; 2001-08). This study is conducted as a community-university partnership between SPHERU and Communities *for* Children, Saskatoon's planning council for a child and youth-friendly community, in association with Saskatoon public and separate school boards

- The model below shows how we envision the overlapping roles of researchers, policy makers and practitioners in enhancing child health and well-being. These roles exist within a dynamic societal context which influences and is influenced by activities in the three domains and their intersections
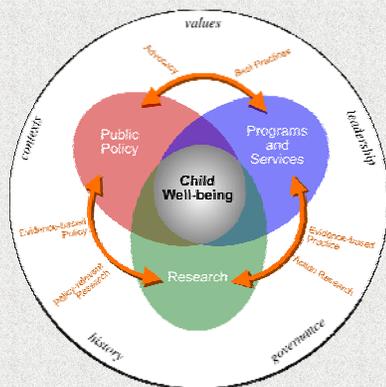
More information on our research is available on our website: www.spheru.ca or by contacting fleur.macqueensmith@usask.ca or Dr. Muhajarine, nazeem.muhajarine@usask.ca

OUR DECISION-MAKER BASED APPROACH

Our approach to conducting research that is useful for decision-makers begins with identifying potential users of research knowledge, involving them early and often, being open to their suggestions when generating research questions, and giving them results in ways that they can use

✓ Identify decision-makers

- Determining the groups of people who will be interested in the research is key. For us, it included parents, teachers, school administrators, children's advocates, children's program and service providers, and government policy makers at various levels

- Partnering with Communities *for* Children enabled us to reach key constituencies in the community and beyond

✓ Involve them early

- Decision-makers can help drive the research process if they are involved from the outset. Our UEY project has had ongoing input from our research team that has both community and academic members, and from our advisory group of policy makers and program planners

✓ Involve them often

- Research projects go through many stages, and going back to potential users often is important so that researchers don't lose touch with users' needs

- Our community partners, as active and well-respected advocates for a child and youth-friendly community, are able to spread our research messages further and more effectively than we could working alone

✓ Conduct research they can use

- To make research results relevant, we need to know how they can help solve problems decision-makers have. What better way than to ask them, which we do often

✓ Give them results they understand

- Decision-makers don't usually read academic journals or attend research conferences, so we need to present our findings to them in other, more accessible formats

- We have disseminated our findings through colourful fact sheets, plain language research reports, and newsletter articles, in print and online. We have made numerous presentations, given workshops and organized forums for decision-makers

- Clockwise from top: a fact sheet, a brochure for community forums, an article we published in a health promotion group's research newsletter, a page from our community mapping report, and our website (www.spheru.ca)
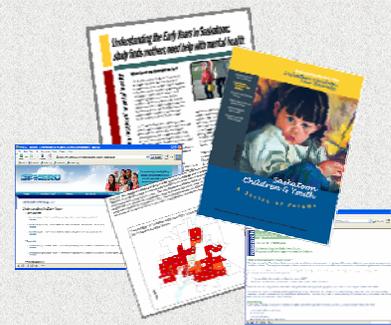
OUR SUCCESSES: CHANGES BASED ON OUR RESEARCH

We have been able to track many instances where our research findings have influenced decision-making:
- the school boards we are working with have introduced major literacy initiatives and are testing full-day, every day kindergarten
- the public school board is developing one of their schools into an integrated school and child care centre, and our community partners, Communities *for* Children, are serving as advisors for this project
- the provincial ministry of learning has contracted us to conduct an assessment of full-time kindergarten programs in several school boards who are pilot-testing it
- the provincial ministry of learning has increased funding for additional speech and language pathologists
- the Saskatoon Public Library has improved access to service in areas that we identified as underserviced

In addition, this work has influenced both research partners in this collaborative project:
- Communities *for* Children has committed to conducting and facilitating local research, and making their advocacy and program development evidence-based
- SPHERU's child health research program is following this model in other projects, and sharing what we have learned with others