

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The CHAT initiative aims to build the capacity of school communities to implement evidence-based practices that will improve student health and wellbeing, with a focus on resilience, drug and road safety education. This report describes the findings of the CHAT Evaluation Project that examined how CHAT is being implemented in participating schools and the observed changes to whole-school policies, practices and environments as reported by the SDERA Implementation Team (Regional Consultants), school teams, parents and students. The findings will inform future planning of implementation delivery and sustainability in schools.

This process evaluation of the CHAT initiative has contributed to understandings of the successes and challenges of implementing whole-school health promotion initiatives, measures of implementation processes and activities and provides evidence of the positive changes in school communities when systemic capacity building for implementation is integral.

Key messages:

- Empirical evidence supports the use of a whole-school approach in order to address the complexities of the risk and protective factors known to mediate student health issues. However, a 'research to practice' gap exists in implementing effective whole-school health promotion initiatives within real world educational contexts and presents particular evaluation challenges.
- Findings from data ascertained from the SDERA Implementation Team, School CHAT Coordinators and Teams, students and parents reflect positively on the CHAT initiative and its delivery of implementation supports in building school capacity for whole-school change.
- Progress in each of the CHAT model components is being made by schools commensurate with their level of CHAT accreditation and in line with expectations of the field, which suggests a period of four years is required to fully implement a whole-school initiative. Whilst schools reported less progress in some areas, it seems that the CHAT initiative structure is working as intended with schools likely to reach the full implementation stage over three to four years (Gold level) and move into the maintenance and sustainability phases where actions become embedded into the ongoing daily operations of the school.

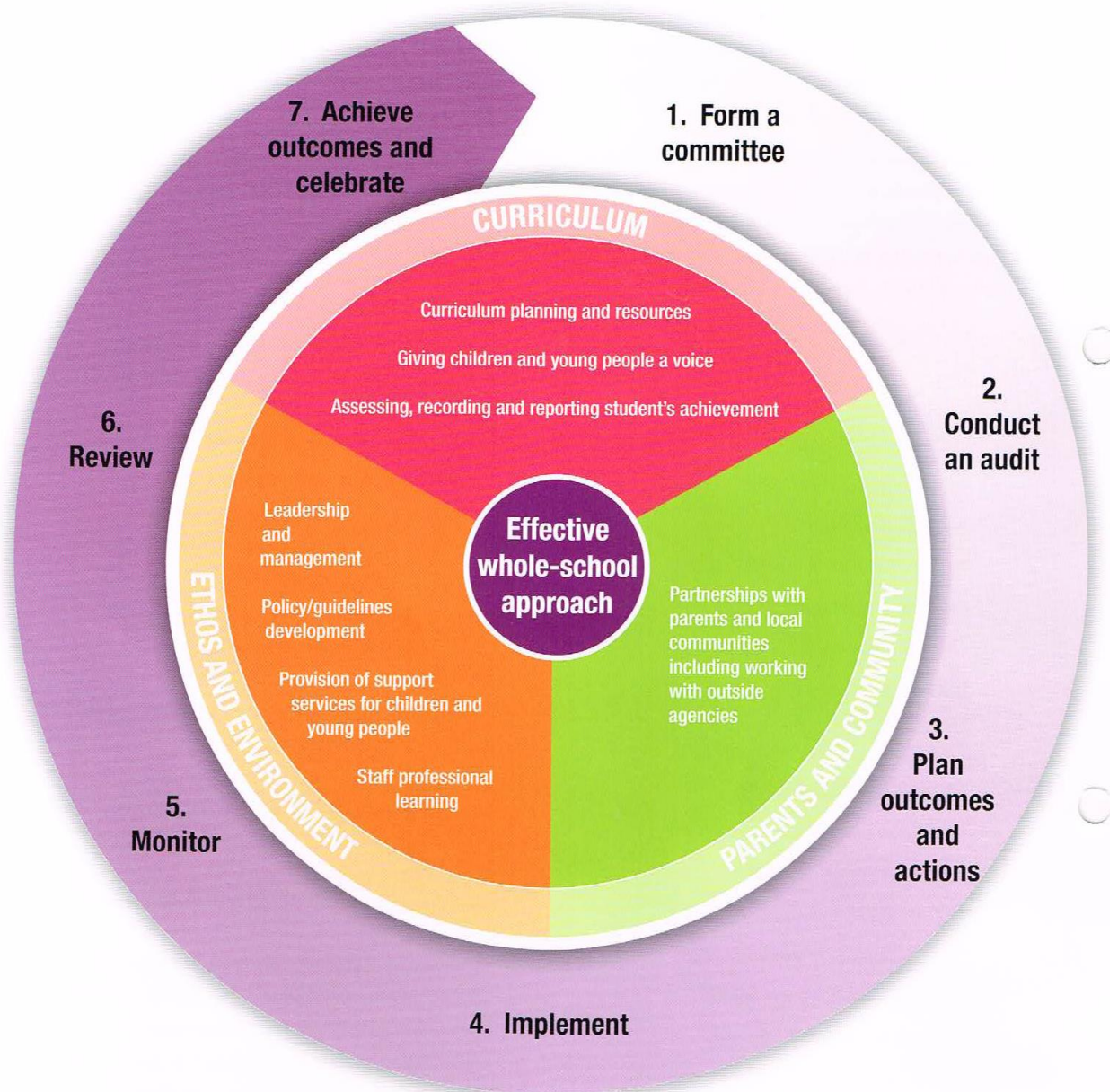
- Schools' success in implementing strategies within the 'Ethos and Environment' component that targets the development of leadership, strategic planning, policies, professional learning for staff and providing services for young people suggests that schools' capacity to address resilience, drug and road safety is being strengthened through involvement in the CHAT initiative. System level strategies are typically viewed as harder to address and implement change but essential for building capacity for sustainability.
- Schools reported lower levels of implementation of strategies that aimed to engage with parents, community and external agencies and strategies to encourage student voice, indicating they have not yet focussed on these areas or need greater support. Securing and funding teacher relief time to support implementation of the CHAT model and their resilience, drug and road safety education strategies was also a challenge.
- Essential components of the implementation supports, as reported by schools, include training and support provided by the SDERA Consultants, staff professional learning and funding to contribute to teacher relief.
- Most schools explicitly described the CHAT initiative as being value for money, with the majority of Bronze and Silver schools perceiving the funding they received as adequate to implement CHAT within their school, however, this was less so for Gold schools.
- Clear recommendations for future focus include: improved supports for components of lower levels of implementation; strengthening monitoring mechanisms and evaluation measures into existing CHAT processes and tools to facilitate quality assurance and impact evaluation preparation; closer alignment between schools' stage of implementation and the delivery of supports to assist schools to progress through the CHAT model efficiently and effectively including assessment of readiness for change to fast track schools through this stage.

Background

The CHAT Evaluation Project was initiated by SDERA (School Drug Education and Road Aware) to conduct a process evaluation of CHAT (Changing Health Acting Together) - their whole-school approach to resilience, drug and road safety education. Based on the Health Promoting Schools Framework, the CHAT Model features three components (Ethos and Environment; Curriculum; and Parents and Community) and a step-by-step implementation process (Figure 1.1).

Approximately 90 Western Australian schools are currently involved in the CHAT initiative (2014) including both primary and secondary schools from metropolitan and regional locations. The majority of the participating schools are from the government education sector

with a small number of Catholic and Independent schools. The CHAT initiative supports schools through small grant funding, staff professional learning, coaching for school teams and a number of resources and tools that assist schools to implement activities to address student resilience, drug and road safety education. Schools progress through three levels of accreditation from Bronze, Silver and Gold by setting and achieving targets on approximately a yearly cycle.



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Figure 1.1.1 CHAT Process Model

Whilst the evidence base for the effectiveness of school-based health promotion interventions is mixed, empirical evidence supports the use of a whole-school approach to address the complexity of the risk and protective factors that are known to mediate student health issues. In practice, this means multiple strategies that target the ecological levels in a school system (individual, classroom, whole-school and wider community). The widely recognised Health Promoting Schools Framework (HPS) uses this whole-school approach to connect education and health in a school environment with the aim of improving the health, wellbeing and learning of students.

In the past, school health promotion interventions have typically focussed on classroom strategies and curriculum or individual support for students in need with limited implementation supports such as teacher training and materials. Rarely did they involve universal whole-school cultural and environmental components with systemic capacity building for whole-school change required to effectively meet the physical, social and emotional needs of all students. This may in part explain the mixed results or lower than expected effect sizes of school health intervention research.

More recently, national and state health and education policies and programs recognise and support a whole-school approach, such as the CHAT initiative. However, whilst a greater understanding of the barriers and enablers to whole-school implementation exists, schools still report implementation challenges limiting their capacity to achieve positive outcomes in practice. There is a clear need for evidence-based implementation strategies to bridge this 'research to practice' gap and strengthen the support for schools to undertake a whole-school process.

Many whole-school interventions are based on the Health Promoting Schools Framework, however robust evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of the Health Promoting Schools Framework is still lacking and hence standardised evaluation tools are scarce. This is somewhat due to the complexities of the multi-strategy interventions required as part of a whole-school approach and the school system and local context in which it is being implemented. Furthermore, significant duration and intensity is needed before an intervention can be expected to make a real difference to students' health and wellbeing often needing longitudinal evidence to demonstrate impacts.

Evidence suggests it takes at least four years to fully implement a new initiative in schools and even longer to facilitate sustainable change, therefore, an impact evaluation of the CHAT initiative on student and staff outcomes was not intended. As schools are moving through the initial implementation phase of the CHAT initiative (1–3 years), this evaluation

aims to look more closely at the CHAT implementation process and how school capacity for implementation can be strengthened. Specifically the research questions aim to understand:

- How schools in different contexts are implementing the CHAT Model;
- What factors are influencing the quality of its implementation;
- How schools' capacity to implement the CHAT Model can be strengthened to promote sustainability and improve student outcomes; and
- What are the potential economic benefits of the CHAT initiative?

Recommendations from this evaluation will contribute to improving the quality and effectiveness of the implementation of the CHAT initiative in schools, with the ultimate aim of improving student resilience, drug and road safety education outcomes.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was taken using online surveys, telephone interviews, group discussions and case studies, with data collected from the SDERA Implementation Team (Regional Consultants), as well as School CHAT Coordinator's and Teams, students and parents implementing the CHAT initiative in their school. As reliable standardised tools are not available to evaluate HPS focussed interventions, evaluation instruments were designed specifically for this project informed by a synthesis of the Health Promoting Schools evaluation literature, theory and current CHAT audit tool. In particular, the 'Quality of Implementation' model by Domitrovich and colleagues and the National Implementation Research Network's 'Active Implementation Frameworks' were used to guide questionnaire development (Domitrovich et al., 2008; National Implementation Research Network, 2014).

SDERA Implementation Team participated in individual telephone interviews and completed an online survey about each of the schools they support to implement CHAT. The CHAT Coordinator at each school was asked to complete an online survey about their schools' experience with CHAT, and a group discussion was held with the School CHAT Team at a selection of schools as part of the case study stage of the research. Discussions were also held with students and parents as part of the case study stage.

Results

Key points arising from the evaluation findings include:

Implementation of three components of the CHAT Model (Ethos and Environment; Curriculum; and Parents and Community)

- SDERA Implementation Team staff and School CHAT Coordinators rated their progress in each of the three components of the CHAT Model as moderate to high, with SDERA staff classifying schools as achieving higher levels of implementation.
- As would be expected, a significant difference was found between Gold schools who were characterised by higher levels of implementation compared to Bronze schools (moderate level of implementation).
- The component of 'Ethos and Environment' was well addressed indicating an increased focus on developing school capacity in leadership, strategic planning and resourcing important for fostering sustainability.
- The 'Parents and Community' component of the CHAT Model presented challenges for implementation.

Implementation of the CHAT implementation process (seven step cycle)

- The majority of schools had implemented to a high standard, the first three steps of the CHAT seven step implementation process, with schools showing improvement at implementing steps 4-7 by the time they are working towards Gold. The majority of schools had implemented the first three steps comprised in the CHAT implementation process to high levels, with Gold schools having completed more fully the remaining steps than Bronze schools.
- Most schools moderately agreed they had planned, implemented and monitored CHAT targets and activities across each of the three components of the CHAT Model, with higher agreement reported by Gold, compared to Bronze schools.
- Qualitative evidence confirmed schools had used the CHAT implementation process to guide their implementation of activities to build resilience, drug and road safety education.

"It's just been a great model of how to do a whole-school approach effectively, because we've started from number one and we're still going around and around, because we're always reviewing and monitoring, it's been a really good process to refer to." [CHAT School]

Barriers and enablers to implementation of CHAT

- The greatest enablers experienced by schools include leadership support, SDERA support and resources, networking and professional learning opportunities, access to teacher relief time and funding.

If we had any problems or a hurdle that we needed ... couldn't solve ourselves, you know, [our SDERA Consultant] was available." [CHAT School]

"Making the whole school accountable, embedding it in their school culture rather than it just being an afterthought, I think that's really positive." [SDERA Consultant]

"It provides that opportunity in another way for us to liaise with and collaborate, network, with other schools and because unless programs, you know, unless programs provide that opportunity sometimes it doesn't happen, you know, and we might be in a district and we have no idea of what's happening in the school up the road or a school in the next town and a program like this allows us that opportunity to do that and it gives us a focus." [CHAT School]

- The largest barriers faced by schools include funding, access to teacher relief time, and parent and community engagement.

"Having the funding to be able to backfill ... to be able to have meetings ... So the money helps but sometimes it's not the dollars that you're most worried about. It's the personnel." [CHAT School]

School-level impact of CHAT

- The CHAT initiative has provided a process and guided framework for action in resilience, drug and road safety education through the establishment of leadership support and a school team to drive planning, implementation and evaluation.

"The main strengths of CHAT are the scaffolding. It actually has a complete structure but also it gives the schools flexibility within that structure." [CHAT School]

"It provides a process and a framework for schools to work with in developing that whole-school approach and I think it gives them time, given that we're working with schools in our three core areas of business, it gives schools that time to ... refine, I guess, the process in relation to those three core areas over time." [SDERA Consultant]

“We looked at the health program initially and looked at what else was being covered there and then we have a learning community as well, so we actually ended up splitting the health program in two, so in the learning community it was like more of the communication, resilience, side of things and then the health program could focus on your drugs and your road safety ... it just gave us like an extra hour a week for all our lower school students, of implementation on a day, you know, on a weekly basis and that also, because of the learning community program, it brought in a lot of other teachers too and now is currently being run by heads of year.” [CHAT School]

- Schools’ resilience, drug and road safety guidelines have been developed or strengthened through their participation in the CHAT initiative.

“It provided us an opportunity to actually write some formal documents, you know, some road safety guidelines, some drug education guidelines, resilience ...” [CHAT School]

- Whole-school implementation has occurred in areas such as developing curriculum plans focussing on resilience, drug and road safety education, physical environment changes, networking and parent engagement strategies.

“The road safety side of it though, with parking and things like that, that’s the thing that we’re still working on. Signage, because you know, we had some strange signs around the school ... trying to just stop kids’ parents from parking the other side of the road when they’ve [the children] got to cross in front of buses, you know.” [CHAT School]

- School community awareness about resilience, drug and road safety has increased, including skill development in the areas of decision making, relationship building and coping strategies.

“We see how it impacts the children and the families and ... I couldn’t speak of it highly [enough] ... to see it now through the whole school and a more integrated approach, and holistic, you know, you just think, ‘Why wouldn’t you jump on board?’” [CHAT School]

“Some of the language I think that the kids now ... and they know about that bouncing back ... last week one of the kids accidentally slipped over and knocked his knee on the limestone wall and I said, ‘Are you okay?’, and he goes, ‘It’s alright, I’m going to bounce back’.” [CHAT School]

“I’ve seen a lot more people wearing helmets when they’re riding their bikes.” [CHAT Student]

“You can’t... easily change it [your decision]”, “because it might be, like, important in your life and you can’t just, like, go and change it”, “it might be something that sticks with you for the rest of your life...” [CHAT Students]

Economic costs of CHAT implementation

- Funding incentives included in the CHAT model are seen as essential to assist schools to progress through the CHAT process and implement resilience, drug and road safety related activities.

“Financial resource that’s allowed us to free teachers up within our school to get out of that fast lane and do things.” [CHAT School]

- Most schools explicitly described the CHAT initiative as being value for money, with around three quarters of Bronze (76%) and Silver (72%) schools perceiving the funding they received as adequate to implement CHAT within their school, however, only a quarter of Gold schools held this view.
- The SDERA Implementation Team are seen as invaluable supports to schools in establishing a whole-school approach, maintaining progress and assisting with knowledge exchange and the development and implementation of framework and activities.

“She comes to all these different meetings as a ... she’s been a really wonderful support to our team and given us lots of direction.” [CHAT School]

- Nearly all schools had contributed their own resources to the implementation of CHAT, including staff time, providing funding to purchase additional resources to support CHAT implementation and reallocation of resources from time to time.

“We’ve been given time, students off timetable as well like to run stuff with whole school groups because the aim was to target the whole, rather than just the individuals and I suppose the resources of Student Services coming together.” [CHAT School]

“Well, I’d definitely say time as in, you know, we’re doing this [CHAT Evaluation interview] in our lunch break.” [CHAT School]

Improvements for strengthening the CHAT initiative recommended by participants

- The SDERA Implementation Team, and School CHAT Coordinators and Teams identified the importance of continuing to support the provision of teacher relief funds to enable professional learning attendance, and CHAT planning and implementation to occur.

“One of the things that can be difficult in schools is ... to release people from their teaching to ... do certain programs and we’re fortunate in a way, I think, we’re [CHAT Coordinator is] part-time so it’s very easy for us if ... we’re funded for a ... for the ... program, for [CHAT Coordinator] to come in and do an additional day.” [CHAT School]

- Encouraging and supporting schools to maintain the composition of their CHAT Team was seen by CHAT Schools to have a positive impact on implementation.
- Where implementation of CHAT activities in schools are hands-on, students are more likely to engage and learn.
- Student and parent participants highlighted the importance of school staff and parents’ role modelling appropriate resilience, drug and road safety behaviours and attitudes to support student learning.

“Once I saw this ... it’s not a very good influence, because once I saw this dad riding with his kids and they had helmets and their dad didn’t. So it’s a bad influence for the kids when the dad doesn’t wear the helmet ... because little kids tend, like, tend to copy the older kids and like, adults.” [CHAT Student]

Conclusion and Recommendations

This final evaluation report details the findings of the evaluation activities and discusses the implications and recommendations for strengthening the successful implementation of the CHAT initiative in schools in the face of the complexities of changing education systems and school environments for greater student impact. Specifically, the following recommendations are proposed.

Recommendations to enhance existing CHAT components:

- That current essential capacity components be continued to support schools’ implementation of the CHAT initiative including coaching provision by the SDERA Consultants, CHAT funding to support teacher relief to attend professional learning and provision of curriculum resources.
- That current or increased funding for teacher relief time and the provision of SDERA professional learning continue to be a part of the CHAT implementation components to build the capacity of CHAT schools to plan, implement and monitor resilience, drug and road safety education strategies.

- That the provision of in-school professional learning be considered by SDERA at the appropriate stage of implementation (e.g. when all staff buy-in is required) to establish common ground and a platform for whole-school communication and discussion about the schools' approach to resilience, drug and road safety education strategies.
- Additionally, that tools for school teams are developed to 'drip feed' whole-school staff along the implementation stages at existing meeting opportunities such as staff meetings to build the capacity of school teams to facilitate whole-school change.
- That CHAT administration tasks are simplified, particularly the Audit and action planning process to enable school staff to complete these in a timely fashion.
- That the funding model for the CHAT initiative be reviewed to assess the needs of accredited Gold level schools to facilitate sustainability and achieve full implementation of all CHAT audit outcomes.
- That further opportunities for communication and learning exchange between school teams, SDERA Implementation Team and other schools is provided to give feedback on the CHAT initiative (structure, processes, resources, activities); share strategies they have implemented with success; and seek support on strategies they find challenging.
- That a CHAT school mentoring program featuring Gold accredited schools mentoring Bronze and Silver schools in common regional areas be considered as a way of facilitating sustainability for Gold schools, upskilling new schools and releasing time for SDERA Consultants to support new schools.
- That additional tools and resources are developed to assist schools to engage parents, particularly as their children get older, and involve them in resilience, drug and road safety education activities; including opportunities for schools to share successful parent engagement strategies with each other.
- That a staff selection tool is developed to guide establishing School CHAT Teams, with emphasis on finding the right members of staff, who are most likely to be in a position to contribute to the Team for the duration of project implementation. Given the dynamic nature of schools and their staffing bodies, guidelines should aim to minimise disruption to CHAT processes and activities and outline induction steps in raising new team member awareness of CHAT, school progress and planned activities to assist in staff transitions.

Recommendations to support SDERA Consultants to support CHAT implementation:

- That an accessible central database be developed which contains information about schools participating in CHAT and set indicators according to each stage of implementation to strengthen centralised monitoring of school progress and achievements and to determine the timing of support provision.
- That additional professional learning for SDERA Consultants be provided to enhance their understanding of implementation processes and the delivery of whole-school action to enable existing coaching support and resources to be efficiently targeted with school needs.
- That mentoring opportunities between SDERA Consultants be facilitated to enhance the sharing of the diverse range of backgrounds, skills and experience and build on existing team strengths. Increase opportunities for SDERA Consultants to share with each other, including challenges they and their schools have faced, and solutions to overcome these challenges could also be considered.

Recommendations for strengthening the CHAT initiative and future directions:

- That an 'implementation road map' be developed to connect the CHAT model to the stages of implementation with specified actions at each stage (e.g. getting ready) to move schools through the Model efficiently and effectively and enhance schools' understanding of what is required.
- That giving students a voice and engaging with parents and the local community be areas of focus by SDERA Consultants in coaching/supporting school teams to implement activities in these areas of the CHAT Model.
- That a Quality Assurance Plan be developed for the CHAT Initiative to reflect the progression of schools into the full implementation stage and sustainability in which monitoring mechanisms are linked to existing CHAT processes and tools.
- That an evaluation component be added to the existing initiative, whereby schools are encouraged and given online tools to survey their school community (staff, students and parents), at the commencement of their participation in CHAT, as well as at key

milestones, such as progression to the next level of CHAT accreditation in preparation for future impact evaluations.

- That an impact evaluation of the CHAT initiative is conducted once a significant number of CHAT schools complete their Gold status and move into the maintenance and sustainability phase of implementation. An impact evaluation is appropriate after four years if school teams have implemented their intended plans with sufficient intensity and duration to potentially achieve real change to staff and student's knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Alternatively new schools entering the CHAT initiative could be tracked over the four years to ensure true baseline measurement of outcomes with a focus on changes within the school community at the school-level.