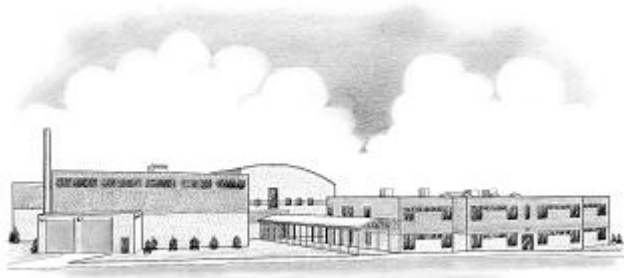


# Champlain Valley Union story



This story of Champlain Valley Union High School's trial incorporation of the spirit dimension into its wellness program was the first step of the Talk About Wellness Initiative. It built a foundation for other public schools to follow in time.

## **Identifying a need**

Concerns about the apparent increase in youth vulnerabilities — to stress, illness, depression, eating and sleep disorders, violence, health problems, and substance abuse — gave rise in 2004 to the Talk About Wellness Initiative. The after-effects of 9/11 exacerbated perceived problems created by a changing societal fabric. Was there something more that could be done to prepare teens to face increasingly complex challenges of adult life?

A concurrent growing interest in wellness programs seemed to offer a possible solution: Helping students develop stronger bodies, minds, emotional foundations, and social ties might give them a more solid foundation and help them develop the resilience to resist more self-destructive behaviors. The National Institute of Wellness has defined Six Dimensions of Wellness — intellectual, physical, emotional, social, spiritual and occupational — as being essential to health and wholeness.

But few public school wellness programs included the element of spirituality — defined as finding meaning and purpose in life — because of fears that “spirituality” would be confused with “religion,” promotion or sponsorship of which is constitutionally prohibited in public schools. How could including the missing element — spirit — benefit students' development?

Initially, the target audience for a study of the question was identified as vulnerable adolescents, but public high schools offered a larger population with a more diverse group of individuals, some of whom might not be “at risk” but might engage in unhealthy or even dangerous activities. Talk About Wellness turned to Champlain Valley Union High School (CVU) — with 1,300 students grades nine through twelve — which had an already-established wellness program and a diverse student body in a respected public high school, to conduct a pilot program. CVU is located in Hinesburg, Vermont, just south of Burlington.

## **The approach**

Talk About Wellness' primary goal was to reach as many students as possible to help them deepen their inner lives and in turn avoid unhealthy or destructive behaviors. Talk About Wellness' vision was that such a program would eventually create a ripple effect,

that schools nationwide would adopt programs that seek to integrate and balance all dimensions of the whole and well child, and that it would create a transformative atmosphere within the public schools that deepens the often-overlooked “spirit dimension.”

The effort was funded by Talk About Wellness with supporting research from the New England Network (NEN) for Child, Youth and Family Services, which in 2004 published *A Part of You So Deep*, in which adolescents had conveyed a hunger for deepening their spiritual lives and clearly differentiated this human need from the practice of an organized religion.

In the fall of 2004, Talk About Wellness asked CVU to participate in a pilot program about the spirit dimension. The school’s administration and seven-member Wellness Team were very receptive, as they had previously adopted the Six Dimensions of Wellness matrix. They had for some time felt the need for incorporating the spirit dimension in their overall wellness work but were concerned that it could be confused with religion. The Talk About Wellness Initiative stipulates that religious pursuits are specific, highly personal, and best left to individuals and families. The spirit dimension of the whole person, on the other hand, is perceived to be a general aspect of being human.

CVU also conducted a wellness program student survey, which demonstrated an interest in meditation, yoga, the arts and music, martial arts, and other physical activities such as dance and intramural sports. It was decided that the Wellness Program, with courses such as personal fitness, provided the best vehicle for introducing activities that students had identified in the NEN study and the CVU survey as desirable ways of deepening their spirits and inner lives.

### **Words into action**

The technical grant from Talk About Wellness was used to help fund the pilot program and the overall Wellness Program; it also supported a new fitness room, nutrition education, and the addition of meditation and yoga as initial activities that enhance focus while reducing stress.

Other elements of the pilot program took several forms.

- A consultant worked with the two teachers participating in the pilot program to create a context for adding the spirit dimension to their existing curricula. Wellness class discussions were broadened to include the awareness and importance of balancing the whole person, inspirational quotes, and conversations based upon questions such as:
  1. When under stress or in a crisis, how does one find calm, strength and solace?
  2. When pulled by conflicting demands, how does one find balance and focus?
  3. What does it mean to act from the heart as well as the mind?
- The teachers found yoga and meditation instructors who were brought into the classroom to work with the teachers and students.

- The Talk About Wellness Initiative hired a communications consultant to work with administrators and staff to identify ways of making the new program appealing to students. One of the ways this was done was at the traditional Sophomore Summit (off-campus retreat), which included an afternoon of “spirit”-related activities during which stickers with catchy phrases (Chillax, Just Be, Breathe, etc.) were distributed to the 350 tenth-graders during lunch. The Student Council had critiqued the sticker graphics, giving student leadership an opportunity to learn about the overall program. A contest allowed students to compete in naming a teen spirit web site (the literature explained the overall purpose of the program), and the \$250 prize was awarded to an entire wellness class, which used it to dine out as a group.

### **Lessons Learned**

The New England Network evaluated CVU’s new spirit-supporting activities, conducting both pre- and post-program assessments that measured stress reduction and self-esteem. The pre-test was given in January and the post-test five months later in early June. The teachers involved in the study had a “spirit” class (with 32 students) and a traditional class (with 39 students), used as a control group, both comprising randomly selected tenth-grade students. The school notified parents in writing before the class explaining the study, and received just one complaint, from a parent asking why her child was not in the spirit class.

Results of the evaluation revealed a minor improvement in all measured areas for both groups, but evaluators wondered whether the study had been conducted over too long a period, with the post-assessment conducted during end of year exams, a stressful period that could have minimized the positive results. Enforcing this suspicion were the students’ written, qualitative comments, which were very positive.

The results were strong enough that CVU decided not only to continue but to expand the program to include more of the wellness team of teachers, all grade levels, and add martial arts, dance, and Pilates in 2006-07. The high school principal, Sean McMannon, wrote on February 8, 2007, that, “I am deeply committed to the integration of spirituality into adolescent learning and leadership. I believe that students are ripe for educational opportunities that encourage the blending of the heart and the mind. When we combine our emotions and our intellect we tend to find a place of balance where there is room for clarity and growth. As educational leaders it is imperative that we create structures and programs to lay the foundation for educators and students.”

In the spring of 2007, Tobin Hart, Ph.D., psychologist, professor, author and co-founder of the ChildSpirit Institute addressed faculty and students at CVU. He and others working in the field also met to examine the idea of a “spirit-supporting framework” for educators to utilize in the classroom. CVU’s experience will be drawn upon, but the framework will be developed for K-12 teachers.

The constraints for other schools to adopt the work of this initiative are time and money

for training, although volunteerism may offset the financial constraints. It is well-documented that training is needed for teachers to incorporate the spirit dimension into their classrooms. It is also clear that teachers cannot take on a new initiative or add to their current requirements. Change will require altering classroom culture (manners, acts of kindness, deep listening, empathy, trust, respect, silence, remembering the breath, noticing the heart) and substituting (such as experiencing muscle groups while teaching yoga rather than simply teaching muscle groups or selecting literature that deepens the spirit connection). The Talk About Wellness Initiative will build upon this prototype, without becoming an independent organization, by working with trainers and educators to create a K-12 framework that can be made available at the regional and national levels through the Talk About Wellness web site, conferences, publications, and general networking. Talk About Wellness is also committed to funding assistance for training programs in order to reduce the barriers to schools' participation.

General recommendations include that a master's level teachers course begin in September 2007 (through December 2007) for the Chittenden South Supervisory Union. This will be followed by technical assistance from Talk About Wellness in the spring of 2008.

Specific recommendations are to imbed spirit work in teaching about wellness as presented in the Six Dimensions of Wellness. It is further recommended that, whenever possible, the words "inner life" or "spirit dimension" be used in lieu of "spirituality" when working in the public schools, because many perceive "spirituality" as a synonym for "religion." In some communities even "yoga" and "meditation" must be replaced with "stretching" and "calming" or "relaxation" because they may be interpreted as religious practices. It is also recommended that more diverse activities, not only meditation and yoga, be made available for different types of students. Some, for example, find solace or inspiration in nature, music, art, and other activities.

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