

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO MEMBERSHIP IN THE SUNSMART SCHOOLS PROGRAM: THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

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Introduction:

It is important that primary schools have comprehensive sun protection policies and practices in place to protect children from overexposure to UVR. Schools in South Australia that have a comprehensive sun protection policy are eligible to join the SunSmart Schools Program which recognises school commitment to sun protection. Previous research has shown that schools that are members of the SunSmart Schools Program are more likely to have comprehensive sun protection policies than schools that are not members; however, in 2013 approximately half of primary schools in South Australia were not members of the program. It was important therefore that the barriers to joining the SunSmart Schools Program be examined to develop strategies for increasing membership.

Methods:

Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 23 principals of primary schools that were not currently members of Cancer Council SA's SunSmart Schools Program.

Outcomes:

Three main barriers to joining the SunSmart Schools Program were identified:

1. Policy requirements of the SunSmart Schools Program. Specifically, most schools utilised sun protection only during school Terms 1 and 4, and this was perceived as a convenient and easy to understand system.
2. Mixed awareness of the SunSmart Schools Program and membership status. Whilst most schools were aware of the program, 8 of the 23 principals incorrectly reported that their school was already a member.
3. Issues surrounding the process of joining and remaining in the SunSmart Schools Program. Principals expressed confusion regarding the membership review process, and perceived the process as a burden.

In response to the barriers identified, Cancer Council SA implemented an online membership system so that schools can easily join the program, check membership status, and renew membership online. A sample policy template was developed for schools to use, and this policy emphasised the importance of using UV levels, not school terms, to determine when sun protection should be used. An increase in membership was observed in response to implementing these changes.

Relevance:

The increase in membership in response to addressing identified structural barriers demonstrates the importance of engagement with non-members to develop strategies which improve Program engagement without compromising Program standards.