

Standard Alignment Brief

Alignment with the Ontario's School Mental Health Strategy

How the Pan-Canadian Standard for School-Based Substance Use Prevention, Education, and Intervention Aligns with and Complements the Ontario's School Mental Health Strategy

At-a-Glance

Ontario's School Mental Health and Addictions Strategy, supported by School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON), is one of Canada's most comprehensive provincial frameworks for school-based mental health. Since 2011, it has provided every school board with an evidence-informed, multi-tiered strategy, implementation coaching, role-specific resources, and professional learning.

The pan-Canadian standard *School-Based Substance Use Prevention, Education, and Intervention: A Multi-Tiered and Developmental Approach for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Schools in Canada* (the Standard) provides a **nationally consistent, substance-use-specific framework** that complements and strengthens SMH-ON's existing architecture. It shares the same multi-tiered logic, the same commitment to identity-affirming practice, and the same emphasis on evidence-informed implementation, while adding the developmental stages, clause-level specificity, and designated responsibilities that are particular to substance use as a domain.

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Anchoring Change is a national initiative designed to transform how schools across Canada address substance use through coordinated, evidence-informed prevention, education, and intervention. Its approach is grounded in developmental and prevention science, student well-being, and the practical realities of education systems.

The initiative is led through a collaborative partnership between Wellstream: The Canadian Centre for Innovation in Child and Youth Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of British Columbia, the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA), Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada, and the Students Commission of Canada.

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Purpose of This Document

This brief is designed for Ontario system leaders, mental health leaders, school administrators, and school mental health professionals who are familiar with SMH-ON's strategy and want to understand how the new Standard relates to the provincial infrastructure they already work within.

Specifically, this document:

- **Demonstrates structural compatibility** between SMH-ON's Aligned and Integrated Model (AIM) and the Standard's multi-tiered architecture
- **Maps SMH-ON's seven foundations** for effective practice to corresponding elements of the Standard
- **Shows how the Standard complements** SMH-ON's existing substance use resources and professional learning
- **Positions adoption of the Standard** as an opportunity to strengthen Ontario's substance use prevention, education, and intervention work within the existing school mental health infrastructure

About the Two Resources

Ontario's School Mental Health and Addictions Strategy

Supported by School Mental Health Ontario and funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, the provincial strategy provides a comprehensive, multi-tiered framework organized through the Aligned and Integrated Model (AIM): Foundation (Tier 1 –wellness promotion, mental health literacy, student leadership, parent and community connections), Notice (Tier 2 – early identification, prevention and early intervention), and Bridge (Tier 3 – intensive supports and service pathways). The strategy is grounded in seven foundations for effective practice: leadership commitment, engagement and collaboration, vision and strategy, infrastructure, processes and protocols, evidence and monitoring, and internal and external communication. At its centre is the Identity-Affirming School Mental Health Frame, which prioritizes commitments to Truth and Reconciliation and equity through four actions: dismantle, engage, amplify, and respond. Every school board has a Mental Health Leadership Team guided by this strategy and supported by an SMH-ON implementation coach.



The Pan-Canadian Standard (2026)

Developed through a collaboration between Wellstream, the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA), Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada, and the Students Commission of Canada, under the management of CSA Group, the pan-Canadian Standard provides a structured set of clauses organized across three developmental stages (K–Grade 5, Grades 6–9, Grades 10–12), three tiers of support (universal, targeted, intensive), and integrated within a Health Promoting Schools framework. Each clause assigns responsibility to school policy makers, administrators, or staff and uses normative language (“shall,” “should,” “may”) to distinguish the potential for impact of the recommendations. The Standard is voluntary and designed to meet schools where they are. Rather than prescribing a single model or requiring immediate compliance, it provides a common vision and practical roadmap for continuous improvement.

How They Relate

Ontario’s school mental health infrastructure and the Standard are not parallel systems; they are structurally compatible and mutually reinforcing frameworks. Both are organized around a multi-tiered system of support. Both ground their work in evidence-informed practice, identity-affirming approaches, and commitments to equity. Both recognize that effective school-based health promotion requires dedicated infrastructure, leadership commitment, and community collaboration, not just good programming.

The key difference is scope. SMH-ON’s strategy addresses the full spectrum of student mental health and addictions across Ontario. The Standard addresses one specific domain—substance use—across all of Canada. This means the Standard provides a level of substance-use-specific detail that a broad mental health strategy, by design, cannot: developmental stages calibrated to substance use readiness, substance-use-specific incident response protocols, harm minimization principles, and clauses addressing education continuity during treatment and recovery.

The practical implication is straightforward: Ontario boards already working within SMH-ON’s strategy have the infrastructure the Standard builds on. Adopting the Standard does not require a new system. Rather, it deepens the substance use dimension of the system that already exists.

Structural Alignment

The tables below map the structural elements of Ontario's school mental health strategy to corresponding elements of the Standard, demonstrating where the two frameworks reinforce each other and where the Standard adds substance-use-specific depth.

SMH-ON/AIM	Pan-Canadian Standard	Where They Connect
<i>Multi-Tiered System of Support</i>		
Tier 1 – Foundation: Wellness promotion, mental health literacy, student leadership, parent/caregiver and community connections, system/school/classroom leadership	Tier 1 – Universal: Belonging-based prevention, health literacy and resilience, social-emotional skill-building, promoting healthy norms, integrating prevention into curriculum, coached and mentored physical activity, student partnership and youth leadership, family/caregiver engagement, community partnerships for prevention and education	Both frameworks position universal promotion as the foundation. The Standard adds substance-use-specific content to SMH-ON's broad wellness promotion: exploring risks and harms, avoiding ineffective approaches, and integrating substance use education across the curriculum.
Tier 2 – Notice: Early identification, prevention and early intervention for mental health, prevention and early intervention for addictions	Tier 2 – Targeted: Responses to first-time use, building protective skills, targeted screening, supportive adult connections, facilitating connections to supports, contextualizing student experiences, trauma-informed responses	Both frameworks prioritize early identification and brief, targeted responses. The Standard specifies substance-use-specific protocols: responses to first-time use, culturally responsive screening, and restorative rather than punitive approaches to incidents.
Tier 3 – Bridge: Intensive supports and service pathways, coordination with community mental health and hospital partners (Right Time, Right Care)	Tier 3 – Intensive: Coordinated wrap-around supports, referrals to accredited community health professionals, individualized support plans, education continuity during treatment and recovery, healing-focused planning, peer support workers	Both frameworks emphasize service pathways and cross-sector coordination. The Standard specifies substance-use-specific intensive supports: education continuity, healing-focused planning, and individualized substance use support plans.

SMH-ON/AIM	Pan-Canadian Standard	Where They Connect
<i>SMH-ON Foundations for Effective Practice</i>		
Leadership commitment	Administrator-specific clauses at every developmental stage (belonging leadership, positive discipline, incident coordination); policy maker clauses requiring strengths-based approaches	Both recognize that leadership is structural. The Standard codifies leadership responsibilities into designated clauses with normative language, providing a national reference point for what leadership commitment looks like in the substance use domain.
Engagement and collaboration	Community partnerships at every developmental stage and tier; family/caregiver engagement; student voice as a guiding principle; Elders and cultural supports in Tier 2 and 3 responses	Both prioritize collaboration with students, families, and communities. The Standard extends this to substance-use-specific partnerships: allied health professionals, peer support workers, and cultural organizations.
Vision and strategy	Health Promoting Schools framework (four components); developing–building–sustaining implementation continuum; evidence-informed approach integrating research, professional expertise, local context, and lived experience	Both emphasize aligned, evidence-informed strategic planning. The Standard’s implementation continuum parallels SMH-ON’s iterative three-year strategy cycle, meeting schools where they are.
Infrastructure	Policy maker clauses for system-level infrastructure; designated responsibilities at each role level; implementation monitoring and evaluation tools	Both recognize that effective practice requires dedicated infrastructure, and ongoing professional development, and implementation monitoring and evaluation to create feedback loops.
Processes and protocols	Clause-level specificity with normative language (“shall,” “should,” “may”); incident recognition and response protocols; non-punitive, non-exclusionary response requirements; periodic policy review	Both emphasize documented, systematic processes. The Standard provides nationally consistent protocols for substance-use-specific processes: incident response, screening, intervention, and referral.

SMH-ON/AIM	Pan-Canadian Standard	Where They Connect
<i>SMH-ON Foundations for Effective Practice</i>		
Evidence and monitoring	Evidence-informed approach as a guiding principle; relationship-based monitoring; culturally responsive screening; implementation monitoring and evaluation tools; periodic review in response to emerging evidence.	Both use evidence as a foundation, not an afterthought. The Standard adds substance-use-specific monitoring guidance: culturally responsive screening and relationship-based (not surveillance-based) monitoring.
Internal and external communication	Aligned messaging with families and caregivers; promoting healthy norms; avoiding ineffective approaches; community-engaged education.	Both prioritize evidence-informed, consistent messaging. The Standard specifies what aligned substance use messaging should include and, critically, what it should avoid (scare tactics, abstinence-only approaches, overly detailed substance information for young children).

Complementing Ontario's Substance Use Resources

SMH-ON has developed a growing suite of substance-use-specific resources, professional learning, and programming. The pan-Canadian Standard provides the whole-school framework that surrounds and supports them. The table below shows how the Standard complements each of SMH-ON's key substance use resources.

SMH-ON Substance Use Resource	How the Pan-Canadian Standards Complements It
Substance Use Guide for School Mental Health Professionals (SBIRT approach: Screening, Brief Intervention, Referral to Treatment)	The Standard provides the whole-school context within which SBIRT operates: Tier 1 prevention clauses reduce the number of students requiring targeted screening, Tier 2 clauses establish the supportive school conditions for brief interventions, and Tier 3 referral pathways connect to the community health infrastructure that the guide references. The Standard's non-punitive incident response clauses ensure that identification does not trigger exclusionary consequences that undermine the SBIRT approach.
School-Based Interventions Related to Cannabis Use (practice guide for SMH professionals)	The Standard's Tier 2 clauses (enacting strengths-based policies, building protective skills, contextualizing student experiences) provide the school-level framework within which cannabis-specific clinical interventions operate. Its harm minimization principle aligns with the guide's motivational interviewing and readiness-based approach.
Healthy Choices: Substance Use and Digital Safety Modules for Grade 6	The Standard's Grades 6–9 Tier 1 clauses (integrating prevention into curriculum, exploring risks and harms, promoting healthy norms) provide the curricular framework these modules serve. Its guidance on avoiding ineffective approaches provides quality assurance criteria for module content.
Webinar series (substance use trends, intersection of addictions and mental health, talking about substance use at home)	The Standard's professional learning clauses (incident recognition training, capacity building for trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice) create a structured rationale for these learning opportunities. Its family/caregiver engagement clauses reinforce the "talking at home" content.
Identity-Affirming School Mental Health Frame (Dismantle, Engage, Amplify, Respond)	The Standard's equity-oriented approach, culturally responsive practice at every tier, and recognition of disproportionate impacts on Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized communities directly operationalize the Frame's four actions within the substance use domain: dismantling punitive approaches, engaging cultural and community supports, amplifying student voice, and responding with identity-affirming interventions.

Using Them Together

Ontario's school mental health infrastructure and the pan-Canadian Standard are designed to reinforce each other. Here is how school communities can leverage both.



If You Are a System Leader or Mental Health Leader

Your board's School Mental Health and Addictions Strategy already provides the multi-tiered infrastructure the Standard builds on. The Standard offers a nationally consistent set of substance-use-specific clauses, with designated responsibilities and normative language, that can inform the substance use and addictions dimension of your board's strategy and action plan. It can also support conversations with community partners by providing a shared reference point for what comprehensive school-based substance use prevention, education, and intervention looks like.



If You Are a School Administrator

The Standard's administrator-specific clauses—belonging leadership, positive discipline, incident coordination, education continuity—provide a structured framework for your role in substance use prevention and response. These complement SMH-ON's broader guidance on school-level mental health leadership by specifying what that leadership looks like when a substance use situation arises.



If You Are a School Mental Health Professional

Your clinical training and SMH-ON's practice resources (the SBIRT guide, cannabis interventions guide, structured psychotherapy protocols) operate within the Standard's Tier 2 and 3 clauses. The Standard provides the school-level conditions that make your clinical work more effective: non-punitive incident response, administrator support, family engagement, education continuity, and coordinated community referral pathways. It also provides a national framework for advocating for the school-system conditions your professional practice depends on.



Building on What Ontario Does Well

Ontario's school mental health infrastructure—its multi-tiered strategy, implementation coaching network, identity-affirming framework, and growing suite of substance use resources—represents some of the strongest school mental health practice in Canada. The Standard for school-based substance use prevention, education, and intervention complements this work by providing a nationally consistent, substance-use-specific framework with the developmental stages, tiered supports, clause-level specificity, and designated responsibilities that translate broad strategic commitments into structured, actionable guidance. Together, they equip Ontario school communities to deliver substance use prevention, education, and intervention that is both rooted in the province's identity-affirming approach and aligned with a national standard of practice.

References

Anchoring Change. (2026). School-Based Substance Use Prevention, Education, and Intervention: A Multi-Tiered and Developmental Approach for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Schools in Canada. <https://anchoringchange.ca/TheStandard>

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Learn More:

Anchoring Change is a national initiative to transform school-based substance use prevention, education, and intervention in Canada



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