



School-Community Partnerships

How can school partnerships with community organizations, peer workers, and culturally responsive services enhance students' substance use health?

School-community partnerships are an effective and equity-oriented strategy for supporting student well-being and reducing substance use and related harms. Research consistently shows that when schools collaborate with community-based mental health, substance use, public health, and social and cultural service providers, youth experience improved access to care, earlier identification of needs, and better psychosocial outcomes. Integrated models, such as collaborative care teams, community-supported prevention programs, and research-practice partnerships, are associated with improvements in youth functioning, reduced trajectories of substance use, and decreased reliance on crisis or hospital-based services. Importantly, these approaches shift responsibility away from schools acting alone and toward shared, coordinated systems of care that are more responsive to the complex social and developmental needs of children and youth.

The quality and intentionality of partnerships matter. Effective school community partnerships are characterized by shared goals, clear roles, evidence-informed programming, and meaningful engagement of students and families. In practice, this may include co-located mental health clinicians, shared data and communication protocols, joint professional development, or coordinated referral pathways that reduce barriers for students and their families/caregivers. Whole-school interventions supported by community partners have demonstrated modest but sustained reductions in substance use and improvements in student well-being. Research-practice partnerships also improve the implementation fidelity of programming as well as its cultural relevance, increasing the likelihood that interventions are feasible, acceptable, and sustainable in school settings.

Within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contexts, the evidence strongly reinforces the importance of community-led, culturally grounded partnerships. Research on substance use interventions for Indigenous youth consistently identifies cultural connectedness, community relationships, and Indigenous knowledge systems as central protective factors. Programs developed in partnership with Indigenous communities, including those that incorporate land-based learning, storytelling, Elders' involvement, and strengths-based approaches, are associated with improved well-being and reductions in substance use risk. Rather than focusing solely on individual behaviour change, these approaches emphasize culture as a source of healing, identity, and belonging. Partnerships with Indigenous communities must be grounded in principles of self-determination and reciprocity; these are not extractive relationships in which schools draw upon Indigenous knowledge, but collaborative ones where Indigenous communities lead.

References

Burnett, T., Battista, K., Butt, M., Sherifali, D., Leatherdale, S. T., & Dobbins, M. (2023). The association between public health engagement in school-based substance use prevention programs and student alcohol, cannabis, e-cigarette and cigarette use. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 114(1), 94–103. <https://doi.org/10.17269/s41997-022-00655-3>

Griffin, K. W., Botvin, G. J., Scheier, L. M., & Williams, C. (2023). Long-term behavioral effects of a school-based prevention program on illicit drug use among young adults. *Journal of Public Health Research*, 12(1), 22799036221146914. <https://doi.org/10.1177/22799036221146914>

Haight, J., Gokiert, R., & Daniels, J. (2023). A collaborative, school-based wraparound support intervention for fostering children and youth's mental health. *Frontiers in Education*, 8, 1289408. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1289408>

Henderson, J., Szatmari, P., Cleverley, K., Ma, C., Hawke, L. D., Cheung, A., Relihan, J., Dixon, M., Quinlan-Davidson, M., Moretti, M., De Oliveira, C., Lee, A., Courtney, D. B., O'Brien, D., McDonald, H., Lemke, K., Pignatiello, T., Monga, S., Kozloff, N., ... Shan, D. (2025). Integrated collaborative care for youths with mental health and substance use challenges: A randomized clinical trial. *JAMA Network Open*, 8(5), e259565. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.9565>

Hoover, S., & Bostic, J. (2021). Schools as a vital component of the child and adolescent mental health system. *Psychiatric Services*, 72(1), 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201900575>

Lawson, G. M., & Owens, J. S. (2024). Research-practice partnerships for the development of school mental health interventions: An introduction to the special issue. *School Mental Health*, 16(3), 593–600. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-024-09707-0>

Snijder, M., Stapinski, L., Lees, B., Ward, J., Conrod, P., Mushquash, C., Belone, L., Champion, K., Chapman, C., Teesson, M., & Newton, N. (2020). Preventing substance use among Indigenous adolescents in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand: A systematic review of the literature. *Prevention Science*, 21(1), 65–85. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-019-01038-w>