



Screening and Relationship-Based Monitoring

What approaches to screening and monitoring should schools employ to support students' substance use health?

Research highlights the importance of developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive approaches to identifying students' strengths and emerging needs. Screening, the systematic use of brief, validated measures to proactively assess student well-being, serves as a Tier 1 strategy within a multi-tiered system of supports. It enables early identification, equitable access to support, and timely connection to Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions before concerns escalate. However, screening is only beneficial when embedded within a system that can act on its findings; without clear follow-up protocols, adequate resources, and informed consent processes, screening risks creating expectations that schools are unable to meet. Schools should ensure that screening is accompanied by transparent communication with families and caregivers, and clear pathways to support.

The selection and implementation of screening tools require careful attention to cultural context and developmental stage. Screening that does not account for these factors risks misidentifying needs, reinforcing inequities, and undermining engagement. For example, deficit-oriented tools may pathologize behaviours that reflect cultural norms or adaptive responses to structural adversity, leading to disproportionate referrals. In contrast, culturally grounded measures, including those that assess strengths such as cultural connectedness, are reliably associated with resilience and positive mental health outcomes. Integrating screening coherently across K–12 ensures that tools, language, and processes evolve with students' developmental stages, creating a consistent, prevention-oriented system that supports early intervention and continuous care.

Formal screening alone may not capture the full picture of student well-being, particularly for younger students for whom validated screening instruments may be less developmentally appropriate, and for Indigenous and culturally diverse youth whose strengths and needs may be better understood through relational rather than standardized approaches. Schools are encouraged to complement periodic screening with ongoing relational practices such as regular check-ins by trusted adults, advisory structures, mentorship programs, and coaching relationships, that create consistent opportunities to notice changes in students' behaviour, mood, or engagement. These practices are not a substitute for systematic screening, but they can extend the reach of early identification into the daily life of the school, where supportive relationships are already forming. When intentionally embedded, relational practices also strengthen the very connections that are themselves protective, reinforcing the upstream prevention and belonging-based approaches that also inform the Standard.



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