



# Strengths-Based Policies and Practices

*What does the research say about strengths-based approaches to school policies and practices related to substance use?*

Schools are increasingly recognizing that how they respond to student substance use has important consequences for student outcomes. A growing body of evidence supports the shift from punitive, deficit-focused approaches toward strengths-based policies and practices that identify and build upon students' existing capacities, relationships, and potential for growth.

Strengths-based approaches are built on the premise that youth are not defined by their difficulties. Rather than focusing on what students are doing wrong, these frameworks ask what students need, what assets they bring, and what conditions would allow them to thrive. Social and emotional learning programs, trauma-informed practices, and restorative approaches are among the most well-evidenced expressions of this framework. These approaches deliver meaningful improvements in student outcomes because they address root causes, such as disconnection, unmet developmental needs, and the impacts of trauma, rather than surface-level behaviours.

Nowhere is the contrast between strengths-based and punitive approaches more consequential than in schools' responses to student substance use. While substance use may be viewed as a health consideration, it is often punished as a behavioural issue, which can have direct and often negative consequences for the student. Punitive responses, such as suspension, expulsion, or law enforcement involvement, sever connections that serve as protective factors against substance use and related harms. By contrast, positive, skill-building, and relationship-focused responses build resilience and protective factors while keeping students connected to the school community.

Research also underscores the responsibility of schools to treat policy as a living response to evolving knowledge. As evidence accumulates regarding what works and what causes harm, schools have both an opportunity and an obligation to update their policies and practices in ways that support belonging and encourage positive educational and substance use outcomes. This includes regularly reviewing and revising codes of conduct and substance use response protocols to ensure they align with current evidence on what does and does not support student well-being.



## References

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