



Upstream Prevention and Belonging-Based Practices

What are upstream prevention and belonging-based practices, and how do they support students' substance use health?

Upstream prevention targets the systemic conditions that shape students' well-being and healthy development. Rather than focusing on substance use after it occurs, upstream approaches work to strengthen protective factors, such as building supportive school policies, reducing stigma, and enhancing feelings of belonging, while reducing risk factors like hopelessness and social disconnection. Belonging-based practices specifically focus on ensuring students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported at school. Together, these approaches are associated with positive outcomes, including stronger academic engagement, improved social-emotional well-being, and better mental health. Research consistently shows that students with a strong sense of school belonging report lower rates of substance use, with benefits that may extend into adulthood.

The drivers of school belonging are multifaceted, and the school environment plays a central role. Research identifies a perceived sense of fairness, the creation of inclusive spaces, and meaningful opportunities for student voice and agency as important contributors to belonging. Central to feelings of school belonging is the quality of relationships students experience with adults at school. Mentoring and coaching relationships with supportive adults, whether teachers, counselors, coaches, or other school staff, are especially important. Research suggests that what matters most is not instruction alone, but rather the consistent presence of caring adults with a genuine interest in students' well-being, and the scaffolding of autonomy. Positive adult mentoring is particularly effective and equitable when it is embedded structurally through advisory programs, coaching, or designated mentorship initiatives.

Physical movement and activity represent a specific pathway for strengthening belonging through adult and peer connection, shared experience, and the development of identity within a group. For many students, particularly those who may not find belonging through academic achievement alone, physical activity opportunities offer an alternative pathway to feeling competent, recognized, and connected. Research also points to the bidirectional relationship between physical activity and mental health: movement reduces stress and anxiety, which in turn lowers the psychological barriers that prevent students from engaging meaningfully with school. Critically, these benefits are realized only when physical activity opportunities are genuinely welcoming and accessible to all students, regardless of athletic ability, disability, gender identity, or socioeconomic background. Environments that feel exclusionary or overly competitive can reinforce, rather than remedy, feelings of social disconnection and isolation.



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