

School-Based Substance Use Prevention,
Education, and Intervention:

A NEW PAN-CANADIAN STANDARD

Information for Classroom Teachers



A national initiative to transform school-based substance use prevention, education, and intervention in Canada

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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.

For more information about Anchoring Change:

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Aussi disponible en français.

The Opportunity

Substance use-related harms among young people in Canada are a serious and evolving concern. Drug-related deaths are a leading cause of mortality for Canadians aged 10 to 18, and rates of vaping and polysubstance use among students continue to rise. Many young people report that alcohol and other substances are readily accessible in their schools and communities, and that they are encountering substances at younger ages than in previous generations.

Schools are navigating substance use concerns without a consistent, shared approach. Some schools have invested in comprehensive health education and supportive intervention pathways, while others rely on abstinence-only messaging or reactive disciplinary responses that research has shown to be ineffective and potentially harmful. As classroom teachers, you encounter the realities of substance use every day, whether through changes in student behaviour, disclosures from students or families/caregivers, or the broader effects of substance-related harms on school communities.

A new national framework now exists to support you in preventing and responding to substance use in ways that are evidence-informed, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in care.

What Is the 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”) is a voluntary, pan-Canadian framework offering evidence-informed guidance for K–12 schools.

It was developed through a partnership between Wellstream: The Canadian Centre for Innovation in Child and Youth Mental Health and Substance Use (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 Canada (PHE Canada), Students Commission of Canada (SCC), and CSA Group, with meaningful contributions from youth, families/caregivers, educators, health professionals, and Indigenous interest holders.

The Standard is organized around a multi-tiered and developmental approach:



Universal prevention (Tier 1)

Focuses on building protective factors for all students through school climate, belonging, social and emotional learning, and age-appropriate health education



Targeted support (Tier 2)

Provides additional guidance for students showing early signs of risk or substance use through screening, relationship-based monitoring, and small-group interventions



Intensive intervention (Tier 3)

Addresses more complex situations through individualized care pathways and coordination with school-based teams, families/ caregivers, and community services

The Standard also takes a developmental lens, recognizing that prevention, education, and intervention look different across early and middle childhood (kindergarten to Grade 5), early and middle adolescence (Grade 6 to 9), and late adolescence (Grade 10 to 12).

Why This Matters for Your Practice

As a classroom teacher, you are already doing much of the work the Standard describes. It provides a framework that names, connects, and strengthens what you do. Here is why it matters for your daily practice:



You are already encountering substance use

Whether or not substance use is visible in your classroom, it is present in the lives of many of your students. Some are navigating questions about substances, others are exposed to substance use in their homes or communities, and some are using substances themselves. The Standard provides a framework for understanding these realities and responding with confidence and care.



Prevention is everyone's work, not a specialist's job

Much of what the Standard calls for at Tier 1 is work you are already doing: building trusting relationships with students, fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom, creating physically and emotionally safe learning environments, and teaching health literacy. You do not need to be a substance use expert to be a central part of your school's approach to substance use. You need to understand the role you play within a coordinated system and how your daily practice contributes to it.



It connects to work you are already doing

The Standard aligns with priorities you are already navigating in your school, including social and emotional learning, trauma-informed practice, inclusive education, classroom community building, and health and physical education curriculum. It provides a unifying framework that connects these areas to a specific and pressing issue, helping you see how the work you do across the day contributes to a coherent approach to substance use prevention, education, and intervention.



Care, not enforcement

The Standard is grounded in principles of harm minimization; equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID); and a commitment to care-based rather than punishment-based responses. When a student is struggling with substance use, the goal is connection and support, not suspension or other exclusionary practices. For many educators, this represents a shift from the approaches they experienced or were trained in. The Standard provides the evidence base and practical guidance to make that shift with confidence.

What Does the Standard Look Like in Your Classroom?

Your most direct connection to the Standard is through Tier 1 (universal prevention), the foundation on which all other supports are built. This includes:

- **Building and maintaining classroom environments** where students feel known, valued, and safe, which research identifies as foundational to both belonging and healthy decision-making

- **Delivering age-appropriate health education** that moves beyond fear-based messaging to help students develop critical thinking about substances, understand their effects on health and well-being, and strengthen their ability to make informed decisions and seek support when needed
- **Partnering with colleagues, families/caregivers, students, and school-based teams** as part of a coordinated approach, and knowing when and how to involve others
- **Contributing to a school culture** that reduces stigma around substance use, encourages help-seeking, and positions substance use prevention, education, and intervention as an expression of care for students rather than a compliance exercise
- **Stepping up and in as a supportive adult** who develops psychologically safe relationships with students, advocates for their well-being, and contributes to their sense of connection and belonging

What Can You Do Now?

You do not need to wait for a school-wide adoption process to begin engaging with the Standard. Here are steps you can take now:

Familiarize yourself with the Standard. Read the sections most relevant to the grade levels and subject areas you teach. Understanding the developmental approach and the multi-tiered framework will help you see where your current practice fits and where there may be opportunities to strengthen it.

Start conversations in your school. How does your school currently approach substance use prevention, education, and intervention? Are responses coordinated or ad hoc? Is the language care-based or punishment-based? The Standard provides a shared vocabulary for raising these questions with colleagues and administrators in constructive ways.

Reflect on your own assumptions and practices. Many educators carry beliefs about substance use shaped by personal experiences, professional training, or school culture. The Standard invites an evidence-informed perspective that may challenge some of these assumptions and invite new approaches to students who are struggling.

Champion a care-based approach. You do not need a formal leadership role to shift culture. Every interaction you have with a student is an opportunity to build the trust and belonging that is protective against substance-related harms. When colleagues see care-based responses modelled consistently, it gives others permission to do the same.

Identify your school's existing supports. What policies, resources, protocols, and personnel are already in place at your school? Who do you refer a student to when you have concerns? Understanding your school's current landscape is the first step toward strengthening it. The Standard provides a lens for assessing what exists and what may be missing.

A Shared Language for a Shared Responsibility

One of the most valuable benefits the Standard provides for classroom educators is a common language. When schools adopt the Standard, everyone, from classroom teachers to administrators, and school mental health professionals to families/caregivers, works from the same framework. Having this shared understanding means you are not working in isolation. You can speak the same language as your colleagues, align your efforts with school-wide priorities, and contribute to a coordinated approach rather than responding to substance use on your own.

The Standard does not ask any single teacher to do everything. It describes a coordinated, system-level approach in which everyone has a role. Your role as a classroom teacher is significant because you are on the front lines of the relationships, learning environments, and school cultures that make substance use prevention, education, and intervention possible.

Learn More:

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