

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

A NEW PAN-CANADIAN STANDARD

Information for Pre-Service Teachers



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

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Please cite this document as follows:

Anchoring Change. (2026). School-based Substance Use Prevention, Education, and Intervention: A New Pan-Canadian Standard. Information for Pre-Service Teachers. Vancouver: Anchoring Change.

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 Challenge

Substance use and 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.

Yet school responses remain inconsistent. 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. Teachers entering the profession today will encounter substance use as a reality in their classrooms, hallways, and school communities, regardless of the grade level or subject area they teach.

Currently, Canada lacks a national framework to guide schools in preventing and responding to substance use in ways that are evidence-informed, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in care. That has changed.

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.

How is it Organized?

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 Professional Preparation

As a pre-service teacher, you are developing the knowledge, skills, and professional identity you will carry into schools. The Standard is directly relevant to that preparation in several ways:



You will encounter substance use in your professional practice

Regardless of your subject area or grade, you will work with students who are navigating questions about substances, who are exposed to substance use in their homes or communities, or who are using substances themselves. The Standard provides a framework for understanding these realities and knowing how to respond 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 the kind of work all teachers do: 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 part of a school's approach to substance use. However, you do need to understand the important role you play within a coordinated system that reinforces student health and well-being.



It connects to what you are already learning

The Standard aligns with content you are likely encountering in your teacher education program, 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 in schools.



It's about 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. For new teachers, this is an important orientation: when a student is struggling with substance use, the goal is connection and support, not suspension or other exclusionary practices. The Standard helps you understand what that looks like in practice. For example, if a student discloses that they have been vaping, a response aligned with the Standard would focus on connection, not consequences — asking how they are doing, exploring what is going on in their life, and offering support, rather than an immediate disciplinary referral. This reflects the Standard's commitment to strengths-based, non-exclusionary responses that keep students connected to school and to caring adults.

What Does the Standard Look Like in Practice?

As a beginning teacher, your most direct connection to the Standard will be through Tier 1 (universal prevention), which includes:

- **Building 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 the effects of substances on their health and well-being, and strengthen their ability to make informed decisions and seek support when needed
- “ **Recognizing early signs** that a student may be at risk and knowing how to connect them with school-based supports rather than managing the situation alone
- “ **Partnering with colleagues, families/caregivers, students, and school teams** as part of a coordinated approach, and understanding your role within a larger system
- “ **Contributing to a school culture** that reduces stigma around substance use, encourages help-seeking, and positions substance use prevention, education, and intervention as expressions of care for students
- “ **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?

Familiarize yourself with the Standard. Read the sections most relevant to the grade levels and subject areas you are preparing to teach. Understanding the developmental approach will help you meet students where they are.

Ask questions in your coursework. How does your program address substance use? Where do prevention, harm minimization, and care-based responses appear in your curriculum? If they are absent, the Standard provides a frame for raising these conversations with your instructors. For example, if your program includes a course on classroom management, you might ask how substance use situations are addressed within that content – and whether the approach emphasizes care-based responses over disciplinary ones. If it does not come up, the Standard offers language and evidence you can bring to that conversation.

Reflect on your own assumptions. Many people carry beliefs about substance use shaped by personal experiences, media, or earlier education. The Standard invites an evidence-informed perspective that may challenge some of these assumptions.

Connect with your practicum school. During field placements, observe how your school community responds to substance use. What supports and policies are in place? What language do educators use? How are students who are struggling being treated? The Standard gives you a lens for these observations.

See yourself as part of the solution from day one. You do not need years of experience to contribute to a caring school culture that promotes students' health and well-being. Every interaction you have with a student is an opportunity to build the trust and belonging that is protective against substance-related harms.

A Shared Language for a Shared Responsibility

One of the most valuable benefits the Standard provides for pre-service teachers 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. As a new teacher entering a school community, having this shared understanding means you are not starting from scratch. You can speak the same language as your colleagues, understand the system you are part of, and contribute meaningfully from the outset of your career.

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 new teacher is significant because you will be 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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