

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

A NEW PAN-CANADIAN STANDARD

Information for School Administrators



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

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Cover Image by Simone Paul. *Indigenous students studying using a computer in a campus library. Students from the St'at'imc/Nlaka'pamux and Fort McKay First Nations.*

<https://indigenouseducationstockphotos.trubox.ca/1881/>

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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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Visit: www.anchoringchange.ca

Aussi disponible en français.

The Opportunity

Schools across Canada have called for consistent, evidence-informed approaches to student substance use that are supportive, well-being-focused, and aligned to curriculum. Yet educators often report feeling ill-equipped and under-resourced, and policies and practices vary widely across provinces, territories, and districts.

A new pan-Canadian standard has been developed to address this gap. *School-Based Substance Use Prevention, Education, and Intervention: A Multi-Tiered and Developmental Approach for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Schools in Canada* translates current research into actionable guidance on three integrated components of school-based action: **prevention** that strengthens protective factors and reduces risk; **education** that builds accurate knowledge, skills, and health literacy; and **intervention** that provides timely, non-punitive responses and connects students to supports.

The Standard was co-developed by 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, under the management of CSA Group. A multidisciplinary committee of subject matter experts, including professionals from the education, health, research, and policy sectors, as well as youth and Indigenous interest holders from across Canada, contributed their knowledge, perspectives, and lived experience to its development.

A Nationally Consistent Framework

The Standard provides a shared foundation for school-based action, organized around three interconnected dimensions:

1 Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Universal prevention for all students, targeted supports for those at elevated risk, and intensive intervention coordinated with community partners for students with significant and complex needs

2 Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

Ensuring that teaching, environments, supports, and policies are aligned with what students at different stages are ready to understand and do

3 Health-Promoting Schools (HPS)

Aligning action across environments and relationships, teaching and learning, partnerships and services, and policy

The Standard is guided by principles of equity, trauma-informed practice, cultural responsiveness, harm minimization, and student voice. Together, these dimensions and principles replace fragmented, reactive efforts with a coordinated developmental system that delivers consistent teaching practices, clear pathways to support, and sustained impact on student well-being outcomes.

What Does a Developmental Approach Look Like?

The Standard is scaffolded across three developmental stages:



Early and middle childhood (K-5)

Building foundational social-emotional competencies, protective relationships, school belonging, and inclusive opportunities for physical activity, connection, and play-based learning



Early and middle adolescence (Grades 6-9)

Developing accurate understandings of substance use norms alongside continued skill development in decision-making, critical thinking, relationship-building, and help-seeking



Late adolescence (Grades 10-12)

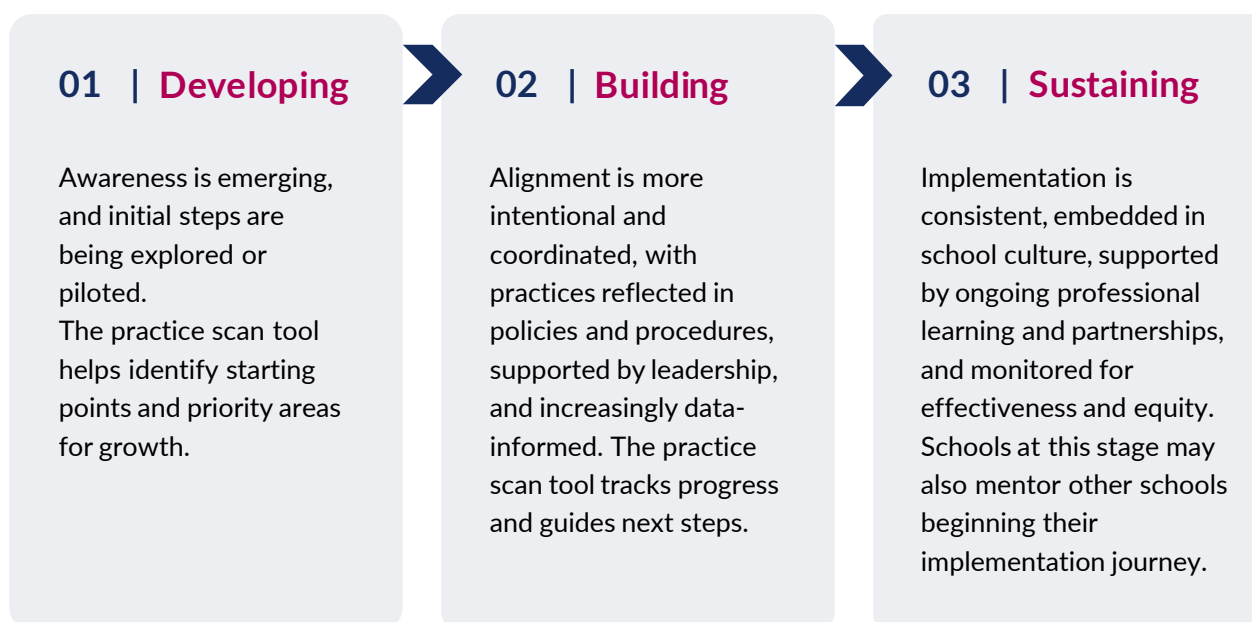
Prioritizing harm-minimization literacy, informed decision-making, and transition readiness. Responses to substance use incidents prioritize keeping students connected and engaged in school with a focus on student agency

What Does This Mean for Your Staff?

The Standard provides clear expectations and shared language across the school community. It identifies the knowledge, competencies, and conditions educators need to deliver effective prevention and education, and to respond with confidence and care when a student is struggling. It also recognizes that this work requires ongoing professional learning and adequate organizational support. The evidence base underpinning the Standard supports the shift from punitive, deficit-focused responses toward strength-based practices, including social and emotional learning, restorative approaches, and relationship-based monitoring, that address root causes rather than surface behaviour.

Getting Started: Implementation

The Standard is designed to meet schools where they are. Many schools will find that their existing practices already align with elements of the Standard; the implementation process is intended to surface and build on those strengths. An accompanying practice scan tool invites schools and districts to explore their alignment along a three-stage continuum:



Movement across this continuum is expected to be gradual and context dependent. Schools are also encouraged to draw on existing data sources, such as student well-being surveys, school climate assessments, and referral data, to understand the impact of their efforts, applying an equity lens to ensure supports are accessible to all students.

What Will This Mean in Practice?

For schools that engage with the Standard, anticipated outcomes include:

Improved school climate and stronger conditions for student belonging and engagement

Reduced substance-related harms and increased help-seeking among students

Stronger coordination between education and health sectors, community organizations, and families

Greater alignment of school policies, procedures, and practices with provincial, territorial, and national priorities in mental health, substance use, and education

Reduced reliance on crisis response through sustained investment in upstream prevention and early identification

The Standard is aspirational by design: it provides direction and a shared language for progress and change. It respects provincial and territorial jurisdiction while offering voluntary, evidence-informed guidance that can be adapted to local contexts, existing school structures, and community needs.

Learn More:

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