

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

A NEW PAN-CANADIAN STANDARD

Information for Superintendents and School District Leaders



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 Challenge

Youth substance use and related harms are a complex and evolving challenge in Canada. Drug-related deaths are a leading cause of mortality for Canadians aged 10 to 18, and rates of vaping and polysubstance use among students have increased sharply. These harms are not equally distributed: Young people are more likely to experience these harms when they face issues like poverty, racism, trauma, mental health difficulties, or lack stable housing and support.

As a school district leader, you are responsible for creating the conditions that enable schools to respond to these challenges consistently, equitably, and effectively. Yet policies and practices vary widely, both across and within districts. Many staff report feeling ill-equipped and under-resourced. Responses are often reactive and fragmented rather than coordinated and preventive. What has been missing is a shared, evidence-informed framework for system-wide action.

What is the Standard?



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 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.

It is organized around three interconnected frameworks: a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) scaffolded across K to 5, Grades 6 to 9, and Grades 10 to 12, and a Health-Promoting Schools (HPS) approach that aligns action across environments and relationships, teaching and learning, partnerships and services, and policy. The Standard is guided by principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization; trauma-informed practice; cultural responsiveness; harm minimization; and student voice.

Your Role in Making this Work

The Standard provides the framework. Superintendents and senior district leaders create the conditions for it to take hold. This includes:

- **Setting direction and expectations** for how substance use is addressed across the district, and ensuring alignment between the Standard and existing district policies on safe schools, mental health, equity, and Indigenous education
- **Resourcing implementation** by allocating time, staffing, and professional learning supports so that schools can engage with the Standard meaningfully
- **Removing barriers** by reviewing competing demands on school administrators and identifying where the Standard can consolidate or replace fragmented initiatives rather than add to them
- **Building cross-portfolio coherence** by connecting the Standard to your district's mental health strategy, equity action plan, Indigenous education framework, and comprehensive school health initiatives
- **Leading a culture shift** by modelling and communicating the move from punitive, reactive approaches toward care-based, preventive responses, and supporting principals and staff through that transition

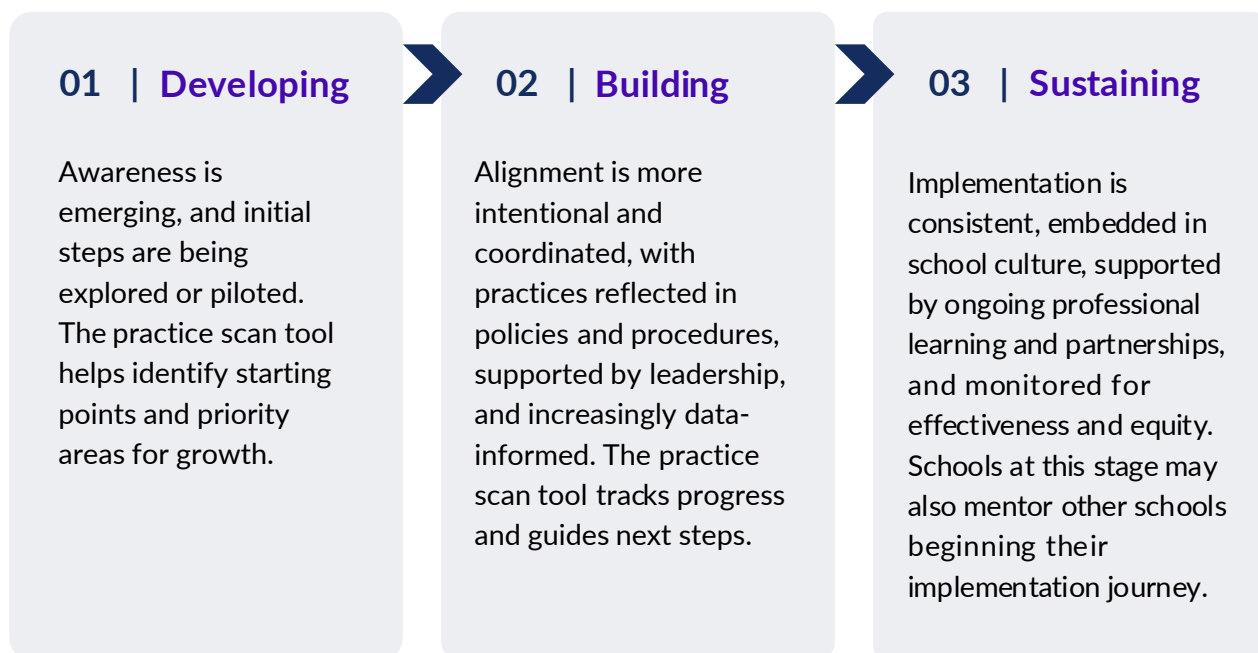
Implementation Support Architecture

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 (Figure 1.)

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.

Figure 1. Three-Stage Continuum for Assessing School and District Alignment



Getting Started: A Phased Approach

The Standard does not require district-wide adoption on day one. It is designed to support a phased, context-sensitive approach:



Assess readiness. Use the accompanying assessment tool to identify where your district's current policies, procedures, practices, and partnerships already align with the Standard, and where the most significant gaps exist.



Start with willing schools. Identify schools with strong leadership and existing alignment as early adopters. Their experience will generate practical insights and internal examples that support a broader rollout.



Invest in professional learning. The Standard identifies the knowledge and competencies school staff need. Prioritize sustained, job-embedded professional learning over one-time training events.



Use data to guide progress. Draw on existing data sources, such as student well-being surveys, school climate assessments, discipline records, and referral data, to monitor impact and identify inequities. The practice scan tool tracks progress along a developing, building, and sustaining continuum of implementation.



Build peer networks. As implementation matures, districts at the sustaining stage can mentor other jurisdictions. Internally, schools further along the continuum can support those just beginning.

Integrating with Existing Priorities

The Standard is not a standalone initiative. It is designed to strengthen and connect work your district is likely already doing. The same protective factors and supportive school conditions that reduce substance use and related harms also contribute to the prevention of mental health difficulties, youth suicide, and youth homelessness, and lead to better outcomes for students across all dimensions of health and learning.

In practice, this means the Standard can serve as a lens for reviewing and aligning:

Safe schools and discipline policies, shifting from zero-tolerance approaches toward care-based responses that keep students connected to their school community

Mental health and well-being strategies, ensuring that substance use is addressed as part of a comprehensive approach rather than in parallel

Equity action plans and Indigenous education frameworks, centering culturally responsive, anti-racist, and decolonizing approaches in how substance use is understood and addressed

Community partnership agreements, providing a common language for coordination with public health, mental health services, social services, and cultural organizations

Professional learning plans, identifying shared approaches across substance use, mental health, trauma-informed practice, and social and emotional learning

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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