

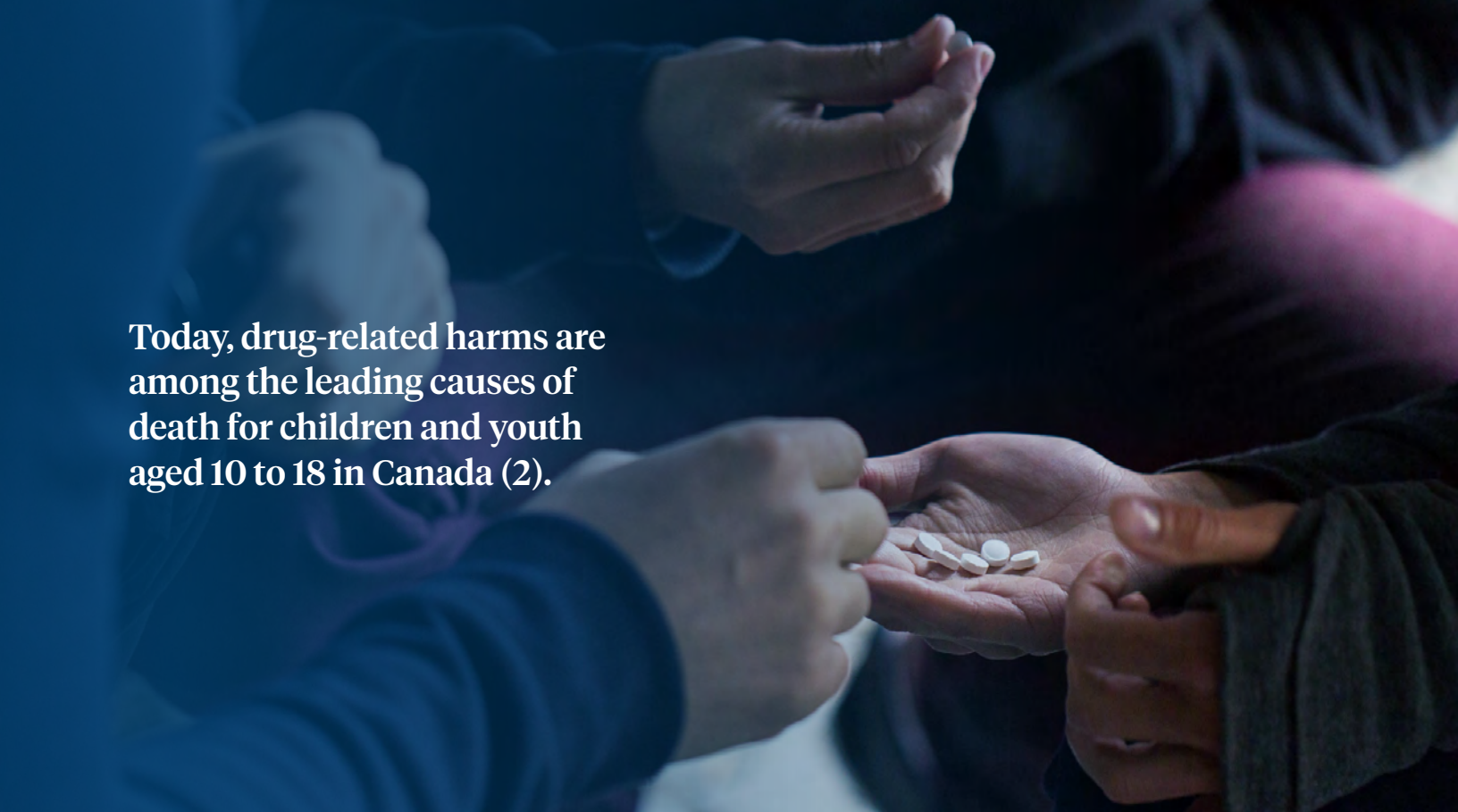


WORKSHOP REPORT

Addressing Youth Substance Use in K-12 Schools

October 2025





Today, drug-related harms are among the leading causes of death for children and youth aged 10 to 18 in Canada (2).

Background

In response to the growing complexity of youth substance use and its impact on school communities across Canada, a new Standard is being developed to guide prevention, education, and intervention in K-12 settings. This initiative, led by Wellstream in partnership with the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) and the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA), is managed by CSA Group (Health Care and Well-being). A multidisciplinary Committee of Subject Matter Experts, comprised of youth and professionals from across Canada, has been convened to support this work and provide their specialized knowledge and lived experience as the Standard is developed.

The goal is to establish a consistent, evidence-informed foundation that supports school leaders and educators in designing effective, equitable, and compassionate approaches to addressing student substance use. Currently, such responses are highly fragmented across jurisdictions. While many education professionals strive

to support students, there is a lack of national guidance and resources which often leaves them navigating this complex issue in isolation, thereby compounding their workloads and exacerbating systemic inequities.

A workshop was held on May 27, 2025, to help inform the development of this Standard. Participants included educators, school system leaders, youth, public health professionals, and policy experts, each bringing valuable insight into the practical challenges and promising solutions that exist across Canada's diverse school contexts.

The urgency of this work is underscored by the national drug poisoning crisis, which has claimed more than 52,000 lives since 2016¹. Today, drug-related harms are among the leading causes of death for children and youth aged 10 to 18 in Canada². Yet most public responses have focused on downstream interventions, while preventive efforts – particularly those rooted in schools – have remained underdeveloped and inconsistently implemented.

¹ Government of Canada, Health Infobase. [Key findings: Opioid- and Stimulant-related Harms in Canada](#). Date modified: 2025-06-25.

² Canadian Paediatric Society. [Risk of illicit drug overdose in youth highlighted in national surveillance program report](#). Date modified: 2023-08-15.

Education systems are uniquely positioned to play an active role in upstream prevention and early intervention. However, they are also compliance-driven, overburdened, and vary widely in resources and mandates. In the absence of regulatory direction, substance use education and support are often left to the discretion of individual schools or teachers. This reality has prompted clear and urgent calls from education leaders across the country for better tools, more precise guidance, and system-level coherence.

This multi-phase initiative seeks to answer that call by supporting systems transformation in school-based substance use response. It aims to build sustainable capacity within school systems to respond to student substance use with confidence, care, and equity. The Standard will help to reflect the lived realities of school communities and take a whole-school approach, focusing on four key dimensions:

- **Teaching and Learning:** Strengthening the integration of substance use topics across curricular and cross-curricular learning.
- **Policy:** Supporting school administrators and staff with strategies and tools to respond appropriately when substance use occurs.
- **Environment and Relationships:** Promoting school settings rooted in wellness, trust, inclusion, and timely access to external supports.
- **Partnerships and Services:** Facilitating connections between schools and the broader community, including families.

This work builds on and aligns with existing frameworks, including the Canadian Healthy School Standards and the Public Health Agency of Canada's Blueprint for Action. These foundational efforts, along with the leadership of many workshop participants, are instrumental in shaping this current initiative.



Workshop Overview

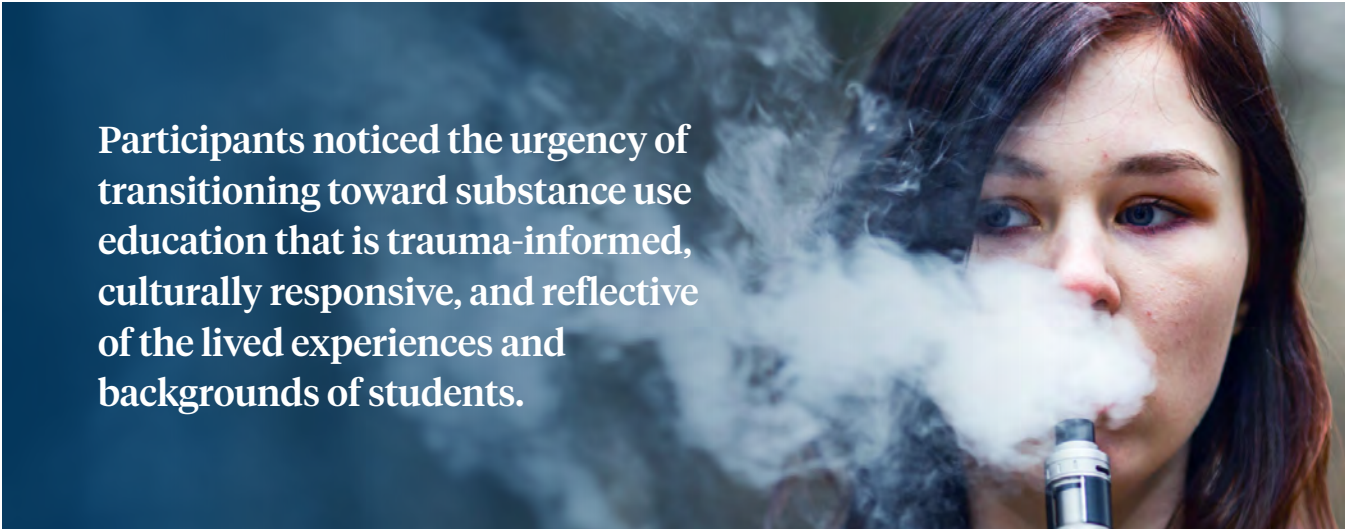
The workshop was attended by over 70 participants from across Canada, including:

- School administrators and educators from elementary and secondary schools.
- Youth representatives and peer educators.
- Mental health and substance use professionals.
- Public health officials and community service providers.
- Researchers and policy advisors.

Participants were divided into breakout groups focused on key themes:

1. Administration-driven responses to student substance use.
2. K-12 substance use education.
3. Partnerships and services.
4. Meaningful youth participation.

Each group was facilitated by members of the Committee of Subject Matter Experts and supported by scribes who captured the discussions.



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What We Heard – Key Themes from Breakout Discussions

Substance Use Education in K-12 Schools

Despite widespread agreement on its importance, participants commented that substance use education in K-12 schools often suffers from fragmented delivery, lack of continuity, and limited effectiveness. Participants noted that a fragmented approach significantly diminishes its impact, leaving students with inconsistent messaging, as well as insufficient knowledge to make informed choices.

Participants noticed the urgency of transitioning toward substance use education that is trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and reflective of the lived experiences and backgrounds of students. Traditional programs that rely heavily on scare tactics, moralizing, or punitive language often alienate students rather than engage them. Instead, educational approaches must validate students' realities and experiences, promoting open dialogue and providing accurate, age-appropriate information without judgment or stigma. Programs that adopt culturally sensitive and trauma-informed frameworks create safer, more supportive environments where students feel empowered to seek help and make healthier decisions.

Another critical recommendation involved integrating substance use education across various subjects in the curriculum, rather than confining it solely to isolated physical health and education (PHE) or guidance classes. Embedding this education within subjects such as math, literature, science, and social studies can greatly enhance its relevance, depth, and accessibility. For instance, it was offered that math classes could explore statistical trends related to substance use, literature classes could examine narratives about substance dependence or recovery, and social studies lessons might analyze historical, social, and economic influences on substance use trends and trajectories. Such cross-curricular integration not only enriches students' understanding but also helps normalize discussions about substance use, reinforcing its relevance throughout their broader educational journey.

Finally, participants emphasized the critical need for ongoing professional development to equip teachers effectively, highlighting that educators could use comprehensive training in harm minimization strategies, upstream prevention approaches, and comprehensive school health frameworks to confidently and appropriately address substance use issues in the classroom. Continuous professional learning was recommended, so that educators remain

informed about evolving trends and best practices, equipping them with the skills necessary to support students compassionately and knowledgeably. Such training was perceived as holding the potential to empower teachers to facilitate open, honest discussions that resonate with students, fostering resilience and positive academic and health outcomes.

Administration-Driven Responses to Student Substance Use

Participants noted that educators and administrators are increasingly overwhelmed by mounting responsibilities which extend beyond traditional teaching roles. The expectations placed upon school staff to manage student well-being have been seen to continue to rise sharply, often without the necessary training, resources, or clear policy guidance. Amid these growing pressures, vaping has emerged as a uniquely challenging issue due to its discreet nature, widespread prevalence, and the difficulty educators face in effectively monitoring and intervening, especially among younger students.

Vaping was felt to present an unprecedented challenge for schools. Unlike traditional smoking, vaping can occur subtly, often leaving little visible evidence. Students frequently use discreet devices, making detection and intervention difficult. As the popularity of vaping rises among younger students, many administrators have reported feeling ill-equipped to address the issue effectively, underscoring the critical need for additional resources and training.

Adding complexity to this issue is the fact that traditional disciplinary approaches, particularly suspensions, were identified as being ineffective in deterring substance use behaviours. Participants highlighted that punitive measures often fail to address the underlying factors contributing to substance use, such as peer influence, anxiety, stress, or social isolation. Instead, they advocated for supportive, relationship-based interventions that prioritize student well-being and foster trust. Building meaningful connections with students, educating them about the risks associated with substance use, and supporting healthier coping mechanisms are seen as more effective long-term solutions.

Partnerships between schools and health systems were noted as playing a pivotal role in addressing student wellness, yet significant barriers were thought to impede successful collaboration.

To tackle substance use effectively, participants indicated that schools could shift toward comprehensive, whole-school approaches. Such an approach requires collaboration from all staff, not solely administrators or guidance counsellors. Teachers, support staff, coaches, and even custodial staff can play critical roles in identifying students who need additional support, intervening early, and maintaining consistent messaging. Participants noted that, in their experience, schools that have adopted coordinated, collaborative models report better outcomes, emphasizing prevention, education, and ongoing support rather than relying primarily on punitive disciplinary measures.

Ultimately, participants expressed that existing school policies often fail to address the contemporary realities of student substance use. These policies are often outdated, vague, or misaligned with current issues, leaving school staff uncertain about their roles and responsibilities. This policy vacuum exacerbates stress for educators who feel unsupported, uncertain, and overwhelmed. Schools urgently require clear, updated policies that are evidence-based, collaboratively developed, and reflective of current realities. Such policies must also align with comprehensive training programs, empowering educators and administrators to respond confidently and consistently.

Partnerships and Services

Partnerships between schools and health systems were noted as playing a pivotal role in addressing student wellness, yet significant barriers were thought to impede successful collaboration. Participants noted that both the educational and health sectors

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face substantial capacity challenges, which were felt to be constrained by limited funding, stretched resources, and competing priorities. Such constraints make sustained, effective collaboration difficult to achieve, despite the widespread recognition of its value. Overcoming these capacity limitations requires innovative thinking, strategic resource allocation, and long-term commitment from leadership at multiple levels.

A key ingredient in effective collaboration, participants emphasized, is shared ownership built on mutual respect, common goals, and clearly defined roles. It has highlighted that often partnerships falter due to misunderstandings, misaligned expectations, or a reliance on top-down directives that assign blame rather than fostering cooperation. Successful partnerships emerge when all parties feel equally invested, responsibilities are transparent, and dialogue is respectful and solution-oriented. Participants noted that developing these conditions is critical to fostering durable relationships, generating trust, and sustaining meaningful collaboration.

Another significant concern highlighted was the necessity for consistent, evidence-informed messaging across jurisdictions and partner agencies. Participants indicated that conflicting or contradictory messages from different sectors undermine credibility and trust, confusing students, staff, and parents alike. Schools and healthcare services were recommended to align their communications to improve clarity, accuracy, and coherence. Participants emphasized that consistent messaging fosters trust-building, enhances

receptiveness among interested parties, and amplifies the overall impact of joint initiatives.

Finally, evaluation and accountability emerged as essential components in partnership success. It was noted that often, programs or partnerships are initiated without clear definitions of success, measurable outcomes, or strategies for assessing effectiveness. Participants strongly advocated embedding evaluation frameworks and accountability measures into partnership design from the outset. Clearly defined outcomes and ongoing evaluation processes were recommended to facilitate continuous improvement, strengthen transparency, and enable resources to be used effectively. Moreover, it was felt that evaluation reinforces accountability among partners, fostering a culture committed to evidence-informed, outcome-driven approaches.

Meaningful Youth Participation

Meaningful youth participation remains central to developing effective and authentic responses to substance use in schools. However, participants consistently expressed concerns about tokenism, noting that youth representatives often do not adequately reflect the diversity of student experiences, especially those most directly impacted by substance use. Tokenistic representation can unintentionally reinforce existing inequities, leaving marginalized youth feeling unheard and disconnected from decisions that directly affect their lives. Addressing this issue requires intentional efforts to involve a diverse range of student voices, particularly those who have lived experience, so that participation is genuine, inclusive, and impactful.

Youth highlighted their strong desire to be genuinely heard and actively involved in substance use education and prevention strategies. Peer-to-peer education, storytelling, and the creation of safe, non-judgmental spaces were identified as especially valuable approaches. Youth expressed the importance of sharing authentic stories and experiences directly with their peers, fostering empathy, credibility, and deeper engagement. Rather than passive recipients of adult-designed interventions, young people wish to serve as active contributors and co-creators of programming, so that the initiatives resonate deeply and authentically within student communities.

To truly honour youth participation, it's critical to recognize and compensate young people for their contributions appropriately. Participants recommended compensation in various forms, including honoraria, school credits, scholarships, or formal recognition at the school and community levels. By valuing young people's efforts and insights through tangible recognition, schools and communities communicate respect and appreciation for youth voices, reinforcing their roles as equal partners in promoting student well-being.



Finally, effective youth engagement cannot exist in isolation – meaningful family and community engagement must support it. Open, informed, and respectful conversations about substance use must extend beyond school walls, reaching into homes and the broader community. Participants emphasized that youth involvement is most effective when complemented by supportive dialogues at home and in the community, promoting consistent messaging, reducing stigma, and fostering understanding. Participants highlighted that by facilitating supportive and open environments at multiple levels, families and communities strengthen youth efforts and amplify their potential impact.

Calls to Action

Workshop participants identified the following priorities as critical steps to improve school-based responses to youth substance use:



Prioritize Meaningful, Youth-Centred Approaches

- Include authentic and inclusive youth participation, particularly the voices of those most affected by substance use.
- Promote youth-to-youth education, storytelling, peer dialogues.
- Provide compensation or meaningful recognition to youth for their contributions.
- Foster curiosity and safe, non-judgmental spaces where youth feel empowered to engage and ask questions.



Invest in Training and Professional Development

- Provide ongoing training to educators and staff grounded in relational, cultural, and trauma-informed pedagogy.
- Equip teachers with evidence-based knowledge and build their confidence to discuss substance use in classrooms effectively.
- Recruit and support experts who are passionate and skilled in teaching this subject matter.

Calls to Action - cont'd



Create Doable and Context-Sensitive Guidelines

- Design intervention guidelines considering the realistic capacities and resources available to educators, administrators, and support staff.
- Incorporate flexibility to adapt interventions based on local and individual contexts.
- Acknowledge and address the critical issue of educator workload and time constraints to make interventions practical and sustainable.



Strengthen Alignment and Collaboration Across Systems

- Foster precise alignment and communication between educators, administrators, health sectors, policymakers, and community organizations.
- Develop a shared understanding and language about harm minimization, trauma-informed practices, and comprehensive school health.
- Facilitate collaboration at district and provincial levels, bridging gaps between policy and frontline implementation.



Embrace Cross-Curricular and Constructivist Education

- Integrate substance use education meaningfully across subjects (e.g., literature, math, social studies), using constructivist and philosophical inquiry approaches.
- Emphasize curiosity-driven learning and dialogue rather than scare tactics.



Engage Families and Communities

- Shift from child-focused interventions toward family-inclusive approaches, providing staff with training and clear mandates to engage families.
- Promote informed, open conversations about substance use at home and in the community, supporting alignment with school-based messaging.



Implement Evidence-Based, Culturally Safe Practices

- Develop comprehensive, culturally safe approaches, tailored to the diverse lived realities and needs of different student demographics.
- Recognize and address school environments that equate harm minimization with promoting substance use, challenging these misconceptions.



Embed Evaluation and Accountability

- Clearly define measurable outcomes, building ongoing evaluation into program design from the outset.
- Hold partners accountable for effectiveness, emphasizing continuous learning, improvement, and adaptation of strategies.



Collectively, these calls to action emphasize the need to move toward a more inclusive, supportive, evidence-based, and youth-focused approach to substance use education and intervention.



Next Steps

The Committee of Subject Matter Experts that is drafting content for the new Standard will review the insights, recommendations, and calls to action from the workshop to inform the Standards Development Process. The Standard will aim to reflect the lived realities of school communities across Canada and provide practical, evidence-informed guidance that supports upstream prevention, education and intervention. The draft Standard is expected to be released for public review in early fall 2025, with final publication anticipated by the end of the year.

CSA Group

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