

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

A NEW PAN-CANADIAN STANDARD

Information for Community Health and Social Service Partners



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.

A Shared Opportunity

Substance use and related harms among young people 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 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 and community-based health and social service providers are often supporting the same young people, frequently while drawing on different frameworks and referral pathways. A shared framework makes that collaboration easier, strengthening continuity of care, clarifying referral pathways in both directions, and creating more opportunities to intervene early.

A national framework now gives schools evidence-informed guidance on substance use prevention, education, and intervention. For community health and social service partners, it offers a window into how schools are being encouraged to organize their approach, and a shared language for working with them.

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 (PHE) Canada, the Students Commission of Canada, 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 Prevention (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 Prevention (Tier 3)

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

Where the Standard Connects with Public Health

As a community-based health and social service provider, you bring specialized expertise, relationships, and continuity of care that strengthens how young people and families/caregivers are supported around substance use. The Standard explicitly names community partnerships as essential to implementation. Here is how it connects with your work:

Schools are organizing around a shared framework

The Standard gives K–12 schools a common structure for prevention, education, and intervention. Understanding this structure helps you anticipate how schools are approaching substance use, what language they are using, and where your services connect. When working from the same framework, coordination becomes easier and more effective.

Your services map onto the Standard's tiered approach

Some community partners contribute to Tier 1 universal prevention through school-based programming, health promotion, or public education. Many connect at Tier 2 through early intervention, brief counselling, or group-based supports. Others provide Tier 3 intensive services, including substance use treatment, clinical mental health care, harm reduction, crisis response, or recovery supports. The Standard helps you see where your organization fits within the school's continuum of supports and how to communicate that to school staff.

The Standard creates a common language for coordination

Effective partnerships depend on shared language. The Standard provides terminology and structures that schools are being encouraged to adopt or continue, including a multi-tiered framework, developmental stages, and care-based response protocols. When you use this same language in referrals, case conferences, and partnership agreements, it reduces misunderstandings and builds trust between your organization and the schools you serve.

Care, not punishment

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. Many community partners already work from this orientation. The Standard signals that schools are being guided toward the same values, which creates new opportunities for alignment and advocacy.

Where Do Community Partners Connect?

Community partners interface with the Standard at multiple points. Depending on your organization's mandate and the populations you serve, this may include:

- **Contributing to prevention and early intervention** through school-based programming, guest facilitation, health promotion, or consultation on evidence-informed practices

- **Building school capacity** by offering professional learning, sharing community-level data on youth substance use trends, or consulting on policy development
- **Receiving referrals from schools** for students who need community-based supports, and ensuring that intake processes, wait times, and communication pathways are accessible and responsive
- **Participating in coordinated care planning** for students with complex needs, sharing relevant information (with appropriate consent) and collaborating with school-based mental health professionals and families/caregivers
- **Supporting transitions** when students move between community services and school, including re-entry after treatment, to ensure continuity of care and a supportive return to the learning environment

What Can You Do Now?

You do not need to wait for a formal invitation from a school to begin engaging with the Standard. Here are steps you can take now:



Familiarize yourself with the Standard. Read the sections most relevant to your services and the populations you support. Understanding the tiered framework, the developmental lens, and the Standard's approach to referral, intervention, and community partnership will help you see where your organization connects.



Reach out to local schools. Do the schools you serve know what services your organization provides and how to access them? Are referral pathways clear in both directions? The Standard provides a shared vocabulary for initiating or strengthening these conversations with school administrators and mental health professionals.



Offer your expertise. Your organization holds specialized knowledge that complements what schools bring. Consider offering professional learning, consultation on care-based approaches, or co-facilitation of programming. The Standard explicitly encourages schools to draw on community health and social service provider expertise.



Align your processes with school systems. Schools operate on specific timelines with particular constraints around consent, confidentiality, and communication. Understanding these realities and adapting your intake, reporting, and follow-up processes accordingly makes partnership more sustainable and effective.



Advocate for formalized partnerships. The Standard encourages schools to establish and maintain partnerships with community-based health and social services. Use this as a basis to advocate with school districts and health authorities for memoranda of understanding, joint protocols, or other structures that formalize the school-community interface.

A Shared Framework Across Sectors

One of the most valuable benefits the Standard provides is a common language across systems. When schools and community-based health and social service partners work from the same framework, coordination improves, referrals become clearer, and young people are less likely to fall between services. The Standard was designed with community partnership in mind; your role is not peripheral to this work but built into its foundation.

The Standard describes a coordinated, system-level approach in which everyone has a role. Your role as a community partner is significant because you bring the specialized services, community knowledge, and continuity of care that make the whole system stronger for young people.

Learn More:

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