

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

A Multi-Tiered and Developmental Approach for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Schools in Canada

Executive Brief for Ministry 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.

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The Opportunity

Schools in Canada have called for consistent, evidence-informed approaches to student substance use that move beyond punitive responses to supportive, wellbeing-focused prevention, education, and intervention.

This Standard offers clear evidence- and practitioner-informed guidance to strengthen school-based responses across developmental stages and needs.

Organizing Framework

The Standard is organized around three interconnected dimensions:

1 Developmental Stages

The standard is differentiated across developmental periods to ensure age-appropriate responses:

Early/Middle Childhood (Kindergarten-Grade 5)

Foundation-building and protective factor development

Early/Middle Adolescence (Grade 6-9)

Risk awareness and skill development during peak vulnerability

Late Adolescence (Grade 10-12):

Preparation for transition to adult services and independent decision-making

2 Multi-Tiered Approach

Evidence-informed practices organized by intensity of need:

Tier 1 – Universal Prevention

School-wide policies and programs for all students

Tier 2 – Targeted Support

Early identification and intervention for students at elevated risk

Tier 3 – Intensive Intervention

Comprehensive support for students with significant needs

3 Health Promoting Schools

Comprehensive school health approach integrated throughout all clauses, addressing the environment and relationships, teaching and learning, partnerships and services, and policy.

Research Foundations

The framework draws from six key domains of evidence:

- **Upstream prevention and belonging-based** practices that foster school connection and reduce substance use risk
- **Screening and early identification** protocols to prevent escalation of use and related harms
- **Youth and family/caregiver engagement** ensuring meaningful participation in responses
- **Strengths-based policies and practices** that support rather than punish students
- **School-community partnerships** integrating education, health, social, and cultural services
- **Evidence-informed education** and messaging that promotes preventive skill development and help-seeking behaviour

What Makes This Standard Different?



Implementation Support

Efforts to build a comprehensive toolkit and ongoing assistance for sustainable adoption and implementation



Youth Co-Design

Structures for meaningful student involvement in developing implementation resources



Vision-Driven Framework

Standard provides guidance and aspirational goals



Jurisdictional Respect

Flexible framework adaptable to provincial/territorial contexts and priorities

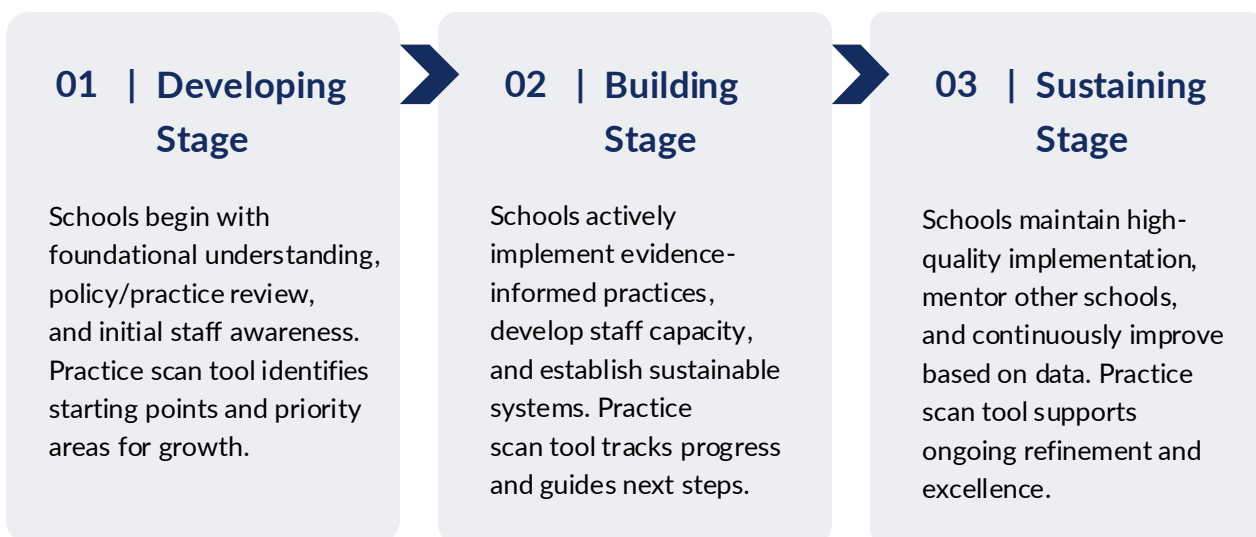


Research-Practice Bridge

Translates evidence into actionable guidance for school practitioners

Implementation Support Architecture

The Standard will support schools through a clear progression of implementation maturity:



Partnership Approach

Collaborative Principles

This initiative respects provincial/territorial jurisdiction while providing voluntary, evidence-informed guidance to support local implementation decisions.

Lead Partners:



Wellstream

Research expertise, implementation science, youth engagement



Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA)

Educational leadership, superintendent networks, system change capacity



Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA)

Evidence-based research, knowledge mobilization, cross-sector networks



Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada

Educator sector reach, knowledge mobilization, curriculum design



Students Commission of Canada

Youth engagement expertise, youth-adult partnership models, authentic student voice

Value Proposition for Government Partners

- **Evidence-Informed Practices and Policies:** Supports evidence-based, effective practices, interventions, and policies
- **System Integration:** Strengthens coordination between education and health sectors
- **Cost-Effectiveness:** Reduces need for intensive crisis response
- **Student Outcomes:** Improved school climate, reduced harm, increased help-seeking, better academic engagement

Learn More:

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