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

A NEW PAN-CANADIAN STANDARD

Information for Public Health Authorities and System Leaders

Anchoring Change

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 population health concern with consequences that extend well beyond adolescence. 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, alongside earlier first exposure than in previous generations. Because schools reach nearly the entire population of children and youth, they are a setting where universal prevention and early intervention can reach young people before harms take hold.

The public health and education sectors have long worked to coordinate their substance use responses, and that effort continues across the country. A shared framework strengthens this work, helping partners align planning, funding, and delivery so that prevention and care reach more young people consistently, and so that the students who stand to benefit most are well served.

A new national framework has been developed to support this coordination, giving schools evidence-informed guidance on substance use prevention, education, and intervention. For public health, it offers a shared structure for connecting population-level prevention strategy with what schools are doing, and a foundation for the intersectoral coordination that durable prevention depends on.

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.

The Standard also takes a developmental lens, recognizing that prevention, education, and intervention look different across early and middle childhood (Kindergarten to Grade 5), early and middle adolescence (Grades 6 to 9), and late adolescence (Grades 10 to 12). It is consistent with the Comprehensive School Health and Health-Promoting Schools approaches already used across Canada by the health and education sectors, and provides specific, evidence-informed content for substance use.

Where the Standard Connects with Public Health

The public health and education sectors share responsibility for the health and well-being of children and youth, and the Standard offers another tool to connect population-level prevention with what happens in schools. It builds on strengths already present in both sectors:

Schools are a setting for population-level prevention

The Standard draws on a public health approach, applying health promotion principles and attending to the social determinants of health. Tiers 1 to 3 of the Standard reach the entire student population by strengthening the conditions that protect young people across the spectrum of substance use, from non-use through substance use associated with harms, spanning primary through tertiary prevention.

The Standard aligns with Health-Promoting Schools

Strong intersectoral connections between health and education are already in place across the country. The Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health, supported by the Public Health Agency of Canada, is one long-standing example, having modelled the Health-Promoting Schools approach for years. The Standard applies those same conditions and commitments to a specific and urgent domain: promoting student well-being and preventing substance-related harms across K–12 schools.

A shared framework enables intersectoral coordination

Much of the strong coordination between public health and education has happened relationship by relationship and case by case. A common framework supports a consistent commitment to operate at the level of strategy, funding, and governance, so that prevention programming, referral pathways, and service capacity can be planned together.

Care and equity, not punishment

The Standard is grounded in public health principles such as harm reduction and health equity. It emphasizes harm minimization; equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID); and care-based rather than punitive responses, reflecting commitments that public health and many school communities already hold. The Standard reinforces this shared direction, creating room for public health to support and extend it.

How the Standard Can Support Public Health Work

Public health authorities can interface with the Standard at the systems level rather than at the individual level. Depending on your jurisdiction's structure and mandate, this may include:

1. **Aligning strategy and frameworks** by mapping the Standard against provincial, territorial, or regional public health and substance use strategies, so that messaging, priorities, and resourcing point in the same direction
2. **Resourcing the system the Standard depends on** because the Standard's Tier 2 and Tier 3 pathways rely on community-based treatment and harm reduction and recovery capacity that public health plans and funds
3. **Strengthening surveillance, data, and evaluation** by aligning indicators, contributing population-level data on youth substance use trends, and supporting evaluation of what the Standard achieves over time
4. **Building workforce and capacity** through embedding public health professionals in schools, continued learning for school and community staff, and investment in the prevention workforce more broadly
5. **Supporting intersectoral governance and policy** by connecting ministries responsible for health and education and supporting system-level agreements that formalize the health-education interface
6. **Advancing health equity** by ensuring that implementation narrows rather than widens disparities across regions, communities, and populations

What Can You Do Now?

Building on the connection points above, here are concrete first steps that draw on what public health is already doing:

Assess alignment. Read the Standard and compare it against the public health frameworks and substance use strategies already operating in your jurisdiction, identifying where they reinforce one another and where opportunities lie.

Embed the Standard in public health planning. When you are developing or renewing youth substance use, mental health, or health promotion strategy, reference the Standard so that the health and education sectors are working toward a common goal.

Convene or strengthen intersectoral tables. Bring health and education partners together around the Standard, drawing on existing mechanisms such as comprehensive school health structures rather than building new ones.

Invest in the capacity that referral pathways require. The Standard's targeted and intensive tiers assume that community services exist and are accessible; population-level planning is what makes that assumption true.

Align data and surveillance. Coordinate indicators and reporting so that the system can tell whether prevention is influencing relevant outcomes.

Advocate for sustained, equitable resourcing. Use the Standard as a basis for advocating, provincially, territorially, and federally, through partners such as the Public Health Agency of Canada, for the durable investment that population-level prevention requires.

A Shared Framework Across Sectors

The Standard's most significant contribution at the system level is a common framework that the public health and education sectors can plan around together. Public health is organized differently across the country, through regional health authorities in some jurisdictions, local public health units in others, and more centralized structures elsewhere, and the most effective point of connection will depend on your own jurisdiction's architecture. What holds true everywhere is that population-level prevention, education, and intervention is more effective when developed by the health and education sectors in partnership.

The Standard describes a coordinated, system-level approach in which everyone has a role. The role of public health is foundational because the upstream conditions, the service capacity, and the equity lens that the Standard depends on are the work that public health already leads.

Learn More:

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