

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

A NEW PAN-CANADIAN STANDARD

Information for School Boards and Divisions



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.

At the system level, school boards and divisions are responsible for ensuring that their schools respond consistently, equitably, and effectively. Yet policies and practices connected to substance use 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. School districts need a shared foundation for 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.

How is it Organized?

The Standard is organized around three interconnected frameworks that together create a coherent, district-wide approach:

1 Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Universal prevention for all students, targeted supports for those at elevated risk, and intensive intervention for students experiencing substance use harms, coordinated with community partners

2 Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

Scaffolded across early and middle childhood (K to 5), early and middle adolescence (Grades 6 to 9), and late adolescence (Grades 10 to 12)

3 Health-Promoting Schools (HPS)

Aligning 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. It is intended for all K to 12 education settings, including public, independent, faith-based, Francophone, First Nations, and alternative or continuing education programs.

What Does this Mean at the District Level?

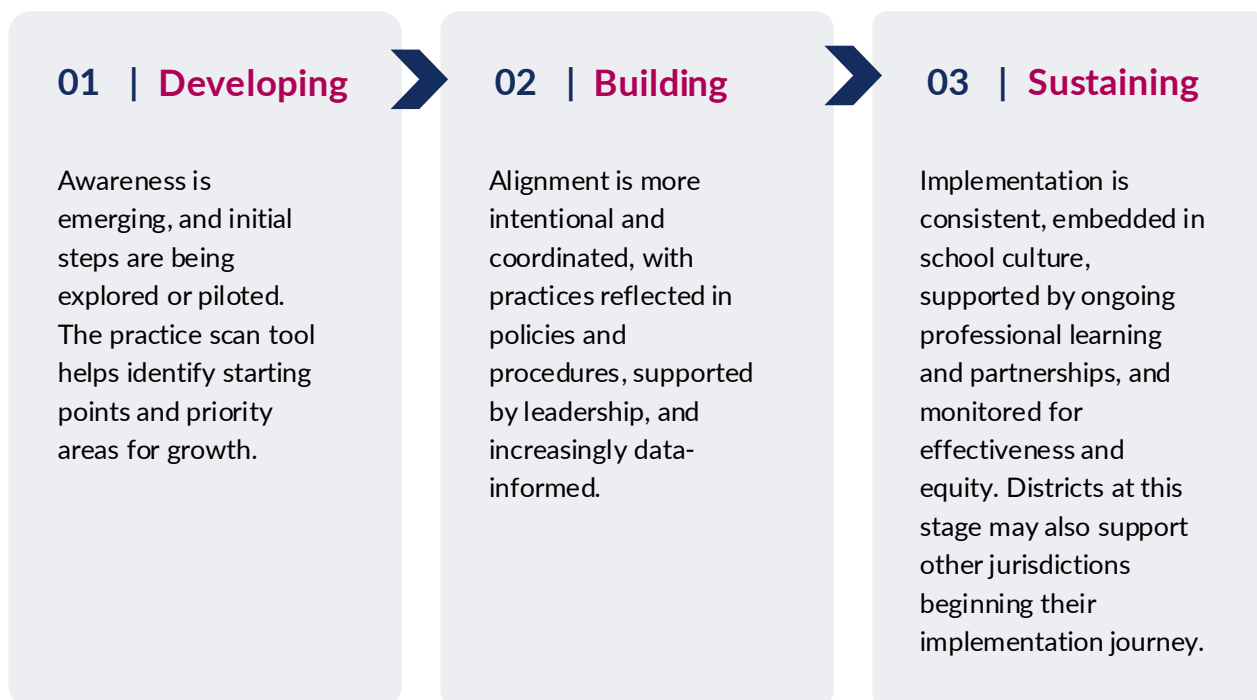
For school boards and divisions, the Standard supports system-level coordination by:

- **Providing a shared framework** for policy review and development, so that substance use-related policies across the district reflect current evidence and shared values
- **Establishing common expectations** for how schools respond to substance use, reducing inconsistency and supporting equitable access to prevention, education, and intervention across schools

- **Informing professional learning priorities** by identifying the knowledge and competencies school staff need, and the organizational conditions required to sustain effective practice
- **Strengthening school-community partnerships** by providing a common language and clear pathways for coordination with public health, mental health, social services, and cultural organizations
- **Supporting accountability and communication** with families/caregivers, communities, and government partners about the district's approach to student substance use and well-being

A Practical Approach to Implementation

The Standard is designed to meet schools and districts where they are. Many will find that 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 supports districts in exploring alignment along a three-stage continuum:



At the system level, patterns of implementation across schools can help districts identify where additional capacity-building, resources, or professional learning supports are needed, and where effective practices are emerging that can inform broader efforts. Districts are encouraged to draw on existing data sources, such as student well-being surveys, school climate assessments, discipline records, and referral data, to monitor impact through an equity lens.

Co-Benefits and Alignment



The Standard recognizes that substance use does not occur in isolation. It is shaped by the same conditions that influence mental health, school engagement, and overall well-being. By adopting anti-stigma, non-punitive, and relationship-based approaches, districts can generate co-benefits that extend beyond substance use prevention. 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.

The Standard complements and reinforces other national and provincial initiatives in comprehensive school health, mental health promotion, suicide prevention, and equity in education.

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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