

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

A NEW PAN-CANADIAN STANDARD

Information for School-Based Mental Health Professionals



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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The Challenge

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.

Yet school responses remain inconsistent. Some schools have invested in comprehensive health education and supportive intervention pathways, while others rely on abstinence-only messaging or reactive disciplinary responses that research has shown to be ineffective and potentially harmful. School-based mental health professionals, including school counsellors, school psychologists, social workers, and nurses, are often the first point of contact when substance use concerns arise, and are frequently called upon to coordinate responses across students, families/caregivers, educators, and community services.

A new national framework now exists to support schools in preventing and responding to substance use in ways that are evidence-informed, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in care. For school-based mental health professionals, it provides a shared structure for the work you are already doing and a common language for collaborating with the educators and systems around you.

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 Canada (PHE Canada and the Students Commission of Canada, under the management of 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 Support (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 Intervention (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 (Grade 6 to 9), and late adolescence (Grade 10 to 12).

Why This Matters for Your Practice

As a school-based mental health professional, you bring specialized knowledge in areas the Standard draws upon, including child and adolescent development, risk and protective factors, trauma-informed practice, and family/caregiver engagement. The Standard provides a framework that situates your expertise within a coordinated, school-wide approach.

Here is why it matters for your practice:



You are central to the school's response

When a student is struggling with substance use or related harms, you are often the person classroom teachers turn to. You may be conducting screenings, facilitating conversations with families/caregivers, coordinating referrals to community services, or supporting students through individualized care pathways. The Standard provides a framework that clarifies and strengthens this coordinating role across all three tiers of support.



Your expertise spans all three tiers

While classroom teachers contribute primarily through Tier 1 universal prevention, your work spans all three tiers. At Tier 1, you may be supporting school-wide mental health promotion, consulting on or delivering classroom instruction, or leading professional learning. At Tier 2, you may be conducting screenings, facilitating small-group interventions, or monitoring students showing early signs of risk. At Tier 3, you may be providing individual interventions or assessments, developing individualized care plans, and coordinating with external providers. The Standard gives structure to this range of work and helps clarify where your professional role fits within the broader system.



It bridges school and community systems

School-based mental health professionals often serve as the bridge between families/caregivers, school systems and community health, social, and justice services. The Standard aligns with frameworks you are already navigating, including comprehensive school health, multi-tiered systems of support, trauma-informed practice, and collaborative care models. It provides a unifying structure that connects substance use prevention, education, and intervention to these broader priorities, reducing fragmentation and supporting more coherent service delivery.



Care, not enforcement

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. When a student is struggling with substance use, the goal is connection and support, not suspension or other exclusionary practices. As a mental health professional, you may already hold this orientation, but the Standard gives you an evidence-informed, pan-Canadian framework for advocating for this approach with administrators, teachers, and families/caregivers who may be accustomed to more punitive models.

What Does the Standard Look Like in Your Practice?

Your practice connects to the Standard across all three tiers. While your specific responsibilities will depend on your role, training, and school/district context, the Standard describes a coordinated approach that includes:



- **Contributing to school-wide prevention** by consulting with classroom teachers on practices that build belonging, safety, and protective factors for all students, and by supporting professional learning on substance use topics
- **Identifying and supporting students at risk** through screening, observation, and relationship-based monitoring, using your professional judgement to determine when early intervention is warranted and what form it should take
- **Coordinating individualized care** for students with more complex substance use concerns, including developing care plans, facilitating communication among school and families/caregivers, and connecting students with community-based services
- **Supporting families/caregivers** in understanding their child's needs and navigating available supports, while building the school's capacity for compassionate, culturally responsive family/caregiver engagement around substance use
- **Advising on policy and protocol** by bringing your clinical and developmental expertise to school-level decisions about how substance use situations are handled, ensuring that responses are care-based, equitable, and aligned with the Standard's principles

What Can You Do Now?

Whether or not your school has formally adopted the Standard, you can begin using it to strengthen your practice and your school's approach. Here are steps you can take now:

- **Familiarize yourself with the Standard.** Read the sections most relevant to your role and the populations you serve. Pay particular attention to the tiered framework, the developmental lens, and the clauses on screening, intervention, and referral pathways. Consider how your current caseload and responsibilities map onto the Standard's structure.
- **Assess your school's current approach.** How does your school currently respond when substance use concerns arise? Are protocols clear and consistently applied? Are responses coordinated across staff, or do they depend on who happens to be involved? The Standard provides a framework for evaluating your school's current landscape and identifying gaps in prevention, education, and intervention.

- **Lead professional learning.** Use the Standard as a resource for building capacity among classroom teachers and other school staff. Many educators carry beliefs about substance use shaped by personal experience or limited training. You are well positioned to facilitate conversations that move your school toward evidence-informed, care-based responses.
- **Strengthen referral and coordination pathways.** Are the connections between your school and community-based substance use services clear, current, and accessible to staff? Do classroom teachers know when and how to refer a student to you? The Standard offers guidance on building and maintaining these pathways so that students move smoothly between tiers of support rather than falling through cracks.
- **Advocate for systemic alignment.** Use the Standard to advocate with school and district leadership for policies, resources, and structures that support a coordinated approach to substance use. Your professional perspective on what students and families/caregivers need is essential to ensure that school-level implementation reflects the Standard's principles of care, equity, and harm minimization.

A Shared Language for a Shared Responsibility

One of the most valuable benefits the Standard provides for school-based mental health professionals is a common language shared with classroom teachers, administrators, and families/caregivers. Mental health professionals may be operating in parallel with other school staff rather than as part of an integrated system. The Standard gives everyone the same framework, making it easier to coordinate across roles, communicate about student needs, and advocate for the resources and structures that effective prevention, education, and intervention require.

The Standard does not ask any single professional to do everything. It describes a coordinated, system-level approach in which everyone has a role. Your role as a school-based mental health professional is significant because you bring the clinical expertise, relational capacity, and systems knowledge that are essential to making substance use prevention, education, and intervention work in practice.

Learn More:

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