

## Standard Alignment Brief

# Alignment with the UNODC/WHO International Standards on Drug Use Prevention

How the Pan-Canadian Standard for School-Based Substance Use Prevention, Education, and Intervention Aligns with and Complements the UNODC/WHO International Standards on Drug Use Prevention

## At-a-Glance

The pan-Canadian 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) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)/World Health Organization (WHO) International Standards on Drug Use Prevention (2nd ed., 2018) share a common foundation: prevention science evidence demonstrating that the healthy and safe development of children and youth depends on coordinated, evidence-based interventions across developmental stages. They are complementary resources operating at different scales.

The **International Standards** (2018) synthesize the global evidence base through an overview of systematic reviews, identifying interventions and policies found to be efficacious in preventing substance use across the lifespan and describing the characteristics of an effective national prevention system.

The **Standard** (2026) translates contemporary scientific evidence and practitioner expertise into a structured, actionable framework for Canadian K–12 schools, providing the developmental scaffolding, tiered structure, normative language, and clause-level specificity needed to implement a coordinated school-based substance use response.

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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.

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## Purpose of This Document

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This brief is designed for education leaders, policymakers, and prevention practitioners who want to understand how the pan-Canadian Standard relates to the UNODC/WHO International Standards. Specifically, this document:

- **Maps the UNODC's evidence-based strategies** to corresponding elements of the pan-Canadian Standard
- **Clarifies the relationship:** the International Standards describe what the global evidence says works; the pan-Canadian Standard operationalizes that and more contemporary evidence for Canadian schools
- **Supports adoption conversations** by positioning the Standard as grounded in the international evidence base for substance use prevention

## About the Two Resources

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### The UNODC/WHO International Standards on Drug Use Prevention (2nd ed., 2018)

Published jointly by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Standards synthesize the global evidence base for substance use prevention. Developed with what the UNODC describes as a globally representative group of 143 researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from 47 countries, the Standards organize the evidence by developmental stage and describe both the specific interventions and policies found to be efficacious and the characteristics of an effective national prevention system. The Standards frame prevention as fundamentally developmental, centred on supporting children and youth to grow up healthy and safe, and characterize effective prevention as addressing vulnerability and resilience factors across environmental and developmental dimensions.

## The Pan-Canadian Standard (2026)

Developed through a 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 (SCC), under the management of CSA Group, the pan-Canadian Standard provides a structured set of clauses organized across three developmental stages (K–Grade 5, Grades 6–9, Grades 10–12), three tiers of support (universal, targeted, intensive), and integrated within a Health Promoting Schools (HPS) – also known as Comprehensive School Health – framework. Each clause assigns responsibility to school policymakers, administrators, or staff and uses normative language (“shall,” “should,” “may”) to distinguish the potential for impact of the various recommendations.

## How They Relate

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The International Standards and the pan-Canadian Standard do not operate in parallel; they operate at different scales. The UNODC/WHO Standards synthesize global evidence and describe what works in substance use prevention across the lifespan, settings, and policy domains. The pan-Canadian Standard takes a defined subset of that evidence—the strategies most relevant to the school setting—and translates it, along with practitioner expertise, into actionable, clause-level guidance for Canadian K–12 schools. This means the Standard is both narrower in scope (school-based prevention rather than the full spectrum of settings) and deeper in application (specific clauses, assigned responsibilities, developmental staging, implementation pathways, and normative language).

## Evidence-to-Practice Alignment

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The table below maps the UNODC/WHO evidence-based strategies and prevention system characteristics to corresponding elements of the pan-Canadian Standard.

| UNODC Strategy                                                | UNODC Description                                                                                                                                       | How the Pan-Canadian Standard Operationalizes This                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Infancy and Early Childhood                                   |                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Prenatal/infancy visitation; Early childhood education</b> | Home visiting for at-risk families; pre-school programmes supporting social and cognitive development in deprived communities; selective; developmental | The Standard's scope begins at Kindergarten, but its family engagement clauses build on the same protective factors the UNODC identifies as critical in early years—caregiving skills, family bonding, addressing socio-economic vulnerabilities. K–Grade 5 universal clauses for social-emotional skill-building, belonging, and connectedness provide the structured continuation of these developmental gains into school. |

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| UNODC Strategy                                                      | UNODC Description                                                                                               | How the Pan-Canadian Standard Operationalizes This                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Middle Childhood</b>                                             |                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Parenting skills programmes</b>                                  | Supporting warm child-rearing, monitoring, pro-social modelling; universal and selective; developmental         | The Standard provides guidance for family/caregiver engagement at every stage and tier: developmentally appropriate information, home-school communication, and family coordination in individualized support planning.                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Personal and social skills education</b>                         | Interactive activities to develop personal and social competencies; universal; primarily developmental          | K–Grade 5 clauses related to the teaching and learning components of the HPS framework guide schools to embed social and emotional learning, self-regulation, and decision-making through interactive, evidence-informed approaches—consistent with the UNODC’s emphasis on interactive methods over lecturing.                                                                                   |
| <b>Classroom environment; Policies to retain children in school</b> | Strengthening classroom management; promoting attendance and school attachment as protective factors; universal | Clauses related to the environments and relationships component of the HPS framework provide guidance for safe, inclusive learning environments through belonging, trauma-informed practices, and culturally responsive climates. Clauses related to the policy component of the HPS framework call for non-punitive responses that keep students connected to school rather than excluding them. |
| <b>Addressing mental health disorders</b>                           | Early identification and support for emotional/behavioural disorders linked to substance use risk               | Targeted and intensive tier clauses address early identification, culturally responsive screening, and support pathways. The Standard positions mental health support as integral to substance use prevention.                                                                                                                                                                                    |

| UNODC Strategy                                                       | UNODC Description                                                                                             | How the Pan-Canadian Standard Operationalizes This                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Early Adolescence                                                    |                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Prevention education based on social competence and influence</b> | Interactive skills-based programmes addressing social skills, substance refusal, normative beliefs; universal | Grades 6–9 clauses related to the teaching and learning component of the HPS framework require evidence-informed substance use education integrating social and emotional learning, peer influence literacy, and critical thinking about norms. Emphasis on interactive, culturally responsive delivery mirrors the UNODC’s effectiveness characteristics. |
| <b>School policies on substance use</b>                              | Non-punitive mechanisms for addressing incidents on school premises; often combined with other strategies     | Clauses related to the policy component of the HPS framework at every tier and stage guide development and review of substance-use-related policies, calling for non-punitive, health-promoting incident responses consistent with the UNODC’s evidence on positive sanctions and counselling referral.                                                    |

| UNODC Strategy                                     | UNODC Description                                                                                     | How the Pan-Canadian Standard Operationalizes This                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Adolescence and Adulthood (School-relevant)        |                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Brief intervention</b>                          | One-to-one counselling for people at risk; motivational interviewing; 5–15 minutes; multiple settings | Intensive tier clauses for Grades 6–12 guide schools to facilitate brief intervention and referral for students identified as at risk for substance use and related harms, within a continuum of school-based responses.                                                            |
| <b>Community-based multi-component initiatives</b> | Partnerships and coalitions delivering prevention across multiple settings                            | Clauses related to the partnerships and services and policy components of the HPS framework create school-level infrastructure for multi-component community initiatives, providing guidance on coordination with health services, cultural organizations, and families/caregivers. |
| <b>Tobacco and alcohol policies</b>                | Population-level policies on availability, marketing, pricing, and age restrictions                   | The Standard does not set population-level policy but advises schools to situate their response within federal, provincial/territorial, and local regulatory frameworks, including alignment with existing tobacco and cannabis legislation.                                        |



| UNODC Strategy                                                                | UNODC Description                                                                                                              | How the Pan-Canadian Standard Operationalizes This                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Characteristics of an Effective Prevention System</b>                      |                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Range of evidence-based interventions; Supportive regulatory framework</b> | Comprehensive interventions across ages, risk levels, and settings; national standards and mandated evidence-based programming | The Standard's architecture—three developmental stages, three tiers, four HPS components, normative language—ensures comprehensive coverage. The Standard is itself a response to the UNODC's call for national standards, developed through a CSA Group-managed process with national partners.                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Research and scientific evidence; Multi-sector coordination</b>            | Evidence-based planning, monitoring, evaluation; cross-sector coordination at national, sub-national, and local levels         | The Standard is grounded in an evidence-informed approach integrating research, professional expertise, local context, and lived experience. It assigns differentiated responsibilities and recommends coordination with community partners, health services, and families/caregivers. The developing-building-sustaining implementation continuum and data-driven feedback loops align with the UNODC's call for systems that contribute to the evidence base. |
| <b>Strong delivery infrastructure and sustainability</b>                      | Adequate financing, ongoing training, technical assistance, sustained investment                                               | The implementation continuum addresses sustainability. Professional learning clauses recognize that implementation requires ongoing investment in staff capacity. The practice scan and implementation planning tool supports schools in building capacity over time.                                                                                                                                                                                           |

## Using Them Together

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- **School and district leaders:** The pan-Canadian Standard is your primary implementation resource. The International Standards serve as a reference when interest holders ask, “Where does this evidence come from?”
- **Provincial/territorial and national policymakers:** The International Standards describe the full architecture of an effective national prevention system, including domains beyond schools. The pan-Canadian Standard operationalizes the school components. Together, they support a whole-of-government approach.
- **Researchers and evaluators:** The International Standards identify areas needing further research. The Standard’s implementation across Canadian schools creates opportunities to contribute to this global evidence base, with built-in mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.



### Grounded in International Evidence, Designed for Canadian Schools

The UNODC and WHO called for national standards that guide evidence-based strategies, create registries of effective programmes, and support schools in implementing evidence-based substance use prevention. The pan-Canadian Standard answers that call for Canada’s K–12 school system, translating global prevention science, alongside practitioner expertise, into a structured, implementable framework that is developmentally staged, culturally responsive, and grounded in the Health Promoting Schools approach. Together, these resources connect the global evidence base to the daily work of Canadian schools.

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### References

Anchoring Change. (2026). School-Based Substance Use Prevention, Education, and Intervention: A Multi-Tiered and Developmental Approach for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Schools in Canada. <https://anchoringchange.ca/TheStandard>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & World Health Organization. (2018). International Standards on Drug Use Prevention (2nd updated ed.). Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

## Learn More:

Anchoring Change is a national initiative to transform school-based substance use prevention, education, and intervention in Canada



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