



Executive Summary

Transforming Substance Use Harm Prevention in Canadian Schools:

An Examination of
School Administrators'
Experiences and Perspectives

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a survey of 204 Canadian kindergarten to 12th grade (K-12) school administrators – principals and vice-principals – conducted as part of Wellstream’s *Transforming Substance Use Harm Prevention in Schools* initiative. The survey aimed to characterize current practices and identify needs related to substance use education and intervention in schools.



Survey findings highlight the urgent need for a pan-Canadian approach to substance use harm prevention in schools, grounded in evidence-aligned practices and reinforced with adequate resources to support professional development and program implementation.

Challenges and Trends

School administrators report recent increases in student substance use, with vaping identified as the most common challenge being managed in school settings. Other prominent concerns in schools include substance use on school property, impacts of family substance use on students, and co-occurring substance use and mental health problems among students.

Cannabis, tobacco or nicotine products, caffeine/energy drinks, and alcohol are the most commonly reported substances used by students on school property.

Administrators are dedicating substantial time to addressing student substance use issues, with over one-third reporting an increase in time spent over the past year. This was attributed to more frequent substance use among students, increasingly complex student circumstances, and limited access to external support services.

Current Practices and Policies

Most administrators are drawing from school and district policies and provincial/territorial regulation to guide their practices related to student substance use. Although most respondents indicate using a variety of strengths-based strategies, a substantial number report enforcing zero-tolerance policies. The application of punitive measures, as directed by guiding policies in many cases, was a challenge for some administrators who noted tensions between such actions and their commitment to strengths-based and relationship-centered approaches.

Schools utilize a variety of substance use programs, with MADD, DARE, and Safer Schools Together being the most common. However, there is a need for programs that are aligned with current evidence and that are adaptable to diverse school contexts.

Administrators express a desire for readily accessible and practical resources that are evidence-aligned and address the needs and realities of education systems and the children and youth they serve.

Barriers to Shifting Practice

Insufficient resources for professional development and a lack of evidence-aligned guidance are identified by school administrators as major barriers to implementing effective substance use education and intervention strategies in schools.

Other challenges include poor access to trained professionals, limited time, confusion regarding suitable approaches for addressing substance use-related harms, and restrictive school policies.

Recommendations

This report emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and evidence-aligned strategy to guide substance use education and intervention in K-12 schools and ease system burden.

School administrators identify accessible resources and increased investment in professional development as crucial for equipping educators with the knowledge and skills needed to deliver effective substance use programming.

Collaboration among schools, substance use experts and health care providers, students, families, communities, and policymakers is essential to realizing a coordinated system of support to reduce substance use harms.

This report provides a foundation for advancing a pan-Canadian strategy to prevent substance use harms through K-12 schools. By implementing the recommendations outlined, the education system will further advance its transformative role in promoting the well-being of children and youth and optimizing their healthy development.

