BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION

To prevent substance-related harms among youth

The Blueprint for Action is a resource providing guidance to help **inform comprehensive and concrete action plans and strategies** at various levels of the Canadian education system to prevent substance-related harms among youth.

! This resource was developed by the Public Health Agency of Canada and informed by the contributions of over 50 diverse school stakeholder who participated in the School Matters Forum in February 2020.

The Blueprint for Action also intends to:

◆ **Encourage a different way of thinking about how to approach youth substance use:** say yes to evidence and no to one-size-fits-all interventions.

◆ **Support school stakeholders to engage their networks:** increase attention, buy-in and resources for long-term approaches.

What is this intervention model all about?

The Blueprint for Action model brings together 1) a framework for informing action on school health matters and 2) four evidence-based approaches to prevent substance-related harms.

1 Comprehensive School Health Framework

! Comprehensive School Health is an internationally-recognized and holistic approach to building healthy school communities.

The framework encourages school communities to act across four interrelated components that comprise the whole school environment when assessing or implementing an intervention:

Teaching and Learning	Policy
Partnerships and Services	Social and Physical Environment

The Comprehensive School Health framework can help to guide and strengthen efforts related to substance use within school communities, while being non-prescriptive and allowing school communities to be nimble and adjust their plans as contexts and needs change.

In a nutshell

Evidence-based substance use education is **one component** of a comprehensive approach for preventing substance-related harms among youth.

! Policy, the social and built environment, and partnerships and services are other important levers that school communities can integrate into their intervention planning.

2 The Four Substance Use Intervention Approaches

UPSTREAM PREVENTION

Addresses the "**root causes**" of a health issue/behaviour.

! Particularly by boosting protective factors (i.e.: healthy parental involvement or after-school activities) while minimizing risk factors (i.e.: substance misuse from parents or inadequate after-school supervision).

STIGMA REDUCTION INITIATIVES

Address stigma, which begins with the negative stereotyping of people, creating separations in "**us**" vs. "**them.**"

These efforts make space for open, informed and non-judgmental conversations about substance use, as well as other stigmatized behaviours, health conditions or identities. **!**

HARM REDUCTION

Reduces the potential **social and health harms** related to substance use, without necessarily promoting or requiring non-use.

! A central part is the understanding that individuals vary in their experience with substance use and openness to support or change. It supports healthy behaviours without "forcing" them and celebrates even the smallest positive behaviour changes, recognizing that each is a step towards improved health and well-being.

EQUITY-ORIENTED INTERVENTIONS

Seek to make institutions and systems more **accessible, responsive, compassionate and safer** for all people.

This is achieved, in part, by developing policies, programs and other interventions that reflect individuals' diverse needs, preferences and life experiences. Cultural safety and trauma- and violence-informed (TVI) practices are two examples of intervention approaches that promote equity. **!**

In a nutshell

The best prevention measures often have **nothing** to do with substance use at all.

! Efforts to improve youths' overall health and well-being and reduce social and health inequities can go a long way in minimizing youths' risk of substance-related harms.

Efforts to prevent substance-related harms among youth must reflect school communities' unique needs, values, preferences and contexts.

! A key part of this is active, meaningful engagement with various school community members, including:
- teachers
- families
- school health nurses
- other school staff
- youth themselves

How can we put these frameworks and approaches into action?

Here are four scenarios that will help you conceptualize the different approaches. To develop your ability to apply the Blueprint for Action, it is important to think critically about different situations. Therefore, with each scenario, a series of questions is provided for each of the substance use intervention approaches that brings the reader to consider responses across the four components of the Comprehensive School Health Framework. These questions aim to guide you in finding potential solutions to the scenarios and other real-life situations.

1

A student's attendance is very poor. However, they consistently attend noon hour pick-up basketball in the gym. One day, the vice-principal comes to the gym, notices the student playing basketball, and proceeds to tell the student that until their class attendance improves, they are not allowed in the gym.

Approach	Questions
Upstream Prevention	How can we identify the barriers that this student may face in regard to their attendance? Why are students missing classes in the first place? What are additional ways in which the school can support participation in basketball programs?
Harm Reduction	What policies are in place to encourage attendance rather than punish absenteeism? How can we use the student's interests to shift their attendance? Where in your school students receive or gather information featuring harm reduction messaging?
Stigma Reduction	How can policies be developed that aim to connect students and other members of the school community with supports related to their substance use, mental health or other aspects of their health and well-being? How does stigma impact students in your school? How can we make sure the students can seek academic support without feeling stereotyped?
Equity-oriented	Is it possible that the student is not feeling a sense of belonging? How can we support students with increasing their sense of belonging in the school? What tools could be provided to the students to ensure an optimal environment for learning and studying and to meet the student's unique needs?

2

A number of teachers at your school have begun an informal contest to see who can "bust" the most students using cannabis while at school. They have had a tremendous amount of "success" in their contest, and this has resulted in a high number of students being referred to the administration each day.

Approach	Questions
Upstream Prevention	How do we get teachers curious about the reasons for the substance use and not just excited about "busting" them? What are some of the potential reasons (trauma, lived experiences) that could be influencing the choices that young people make?
Harm Reduction	How can teachers encourage students to speak with them before or after class if they are struggling with their substance use? How can the teachers/staff who know this is wrong safely share their concerns?
Stigma Reduction	What needs to happen at the school level to ensure that teacher receive useful help and training? How can substance use and harm reduction topics be integrated within broader classroom health related discussions? How much understanding of the student population do teachers have?
Equity-oriented	How can we ensure that ALL students from diverse backgrounds and experiences are feeling engaged in their school? Are there currently opportunities for youth to be involved in substance-related harm strategies and policy discussions?

3

You accompany a group of students on the end-of-year trip and you are staying in a hotel. Early Saturday morning, law enforcement officers knock on your door to say that they have received numerous noise complaints. Upon arriving at your students' rooms, you see empty bottles of alcohol on the table and a number of youth are intoxicated.

Approach	Questions
Upstream Prevention	How could strengthening curricula designed to improve students' health (including mental health) at the school be helpful in engaging students in conversations about substance-related harms? How can we turn this experience into an opportunity for everyone to learn and repair the relationships (restorative justice)?
Harm Reduction	As opposed to not having the party at all, how could the youth have the party in a safer way (less harmful way)? How can safe alcohol consumptions be addressed with all students?
Stigma Reduction	Is it possible to explore safe alcohol consumptions (workshops guides, video, etc.) with ALL students? How do preconceived ideas about alcohol consumption affect the way this situation was dealt with?
Equity-oriented	How have the students' unique backgrounds and educational needs been considered? How can we engage youth in finding the consequence that "fits" them?

4

During a class conversation, a student begins talking nonchalantly about crystal meth use in their home. They state that they are familiar with crystal meth, and exhibit knowledge about its use that the average person may not be aware of.

Approach	Questions
Upstream Prevention	What stakeholders can you identify in this conversation? Which one is the priority? How can the student who is experiencing crystal meth usage at home be supported? (boosting protective factors) How will you manage the class who were just exposed to a really casual discourse about crystal meth?
Harm Reduction	What can the school do to make sure that students are well educated about the harms related to crystal meth? What engaging resources are there available to educate about substance-related harms (movies, documentaries, etc.)?
Stigma Reduction	How can we ensure that the student talking about crystal meth has a support system and is not further stigmatized for their experience? How can the school create a "safe space" where youth can ask questions and seek support without fear of reprisal, judgement or stigmatization?
Equity-oriented	How can trauma and violence-informed lenses be implemented within school policies to support students experiencing substance-related harms? How can a school strengthen its capacity to include historical and cultural lenses in its approach to support students and their families.

In a nutshell

Many traditional approaches to addressing youth substance use (e.g., zero tolerance policies, abstinence-only education, etc.) have limited effectiveness and can produce unintended negative consequences.

! It is important that school communities use the best available evidence to inform their efforts to prevent substance-related harms and evaluate these initiatives on an ongoing basis, instead of simply accepting and repeating the status quo.