

# Rethinking Approaches to Substance Use: A Guide for School Administrators

Implementing the Blueprint for Action as a Comprehensive Approach to Reducing Substance-Related Harms Among Youth



## A Changing Landscape

The landscape of substance use among youth is evolving, particularly with the rise of vaping. It's time to reevaluate the policies and practices that shape our responses. The Blueprint for Action model provides a framework for developing effective, evidence-based strategies tailored to your school's specific needs. As a school administrator, you play a key role in preventing substance-related harms and are uniquely positioned to drive positive change. This guide invites all administrators to rethink their approach to addressing substance use in schools using the Blueprint for Action model - whether they are addressing specific challenges or broader preventative measures that enhance student health and wellbeing.

## The Blueprint for Action – An Invitation to Think Differently

The [Blueprint for Action](#) provides comprehensive, evidence-based guidance for school communities to inform concrete strategies to prevent substance-related harms among youth. It combines the [Comprehensive School Health](#) framework, an internationally recognized approach to building healthy school communities through four distinct but interrelated areas (teaching & learning, social & physical environment, policy, and partnerships & services) with four evidence-based prevention and intervention approaches:

01

### Upstream Prevention

Targets the “**root causes**” of health issues/behaviours by addressing risk and protective factors

02

### Harm Reduction

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

03

### Stigma Reduction

Addresses stigma, which begins with the negative stereotyping of people, creating separations in “**us**” vs. “**them**”

04

### Equity-Oriented Interventions

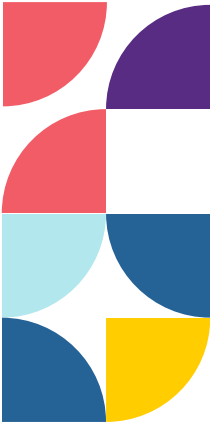
Seek to make school environments more **accessible, responsive, compassionate, and safer** for all people

The Blueprint for Action encourages administrators to think differently about how they approach reducing substance-related harms, considering **the best prevention measures often have nothing to do with substance use at all**. Instead of concentrating solely on health education or disciplinary measures, the Blueprint promotes a broader perspective. It guides administrators in identifying key focus areas, such as updating policies, engaging families and communities, and fostering [positive social environments](#). Centering student voice allows administrators to gain valuable insights into the student experience, ultimately leading to more relevant and impactful strategies.

### Applying the Blueprint for Action Model

As an administrator, you have a unique opportunity to influence a wide range of factors within your school community that support student health and wellbeing. The Blueprint is a tool designed to help build upon the important work you're already doing. By adopting this holistic approach, you can more effectively address the multifaceted challenges associated with substance use, both on school grounds and within the broader context of students' lives.

*This model is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach; its flexibility allows it to be adapted to the unique needs, priorities, and capacity of your school community.*



### The Blueprint for Action Matrix

The Blueprint for Action matrix can support administrators in planning and carrying out a wide range of strategies aligned with the four components of Comprehensive School Health and the four evidence-based interventions.

The matrix is a visual way to support planning activities that best fit your unique school context. Each intersection in the matrix represents an opportunity for actions that you can take to address substance-related harms and enhance youth wellbeing. You are encouraged to use the matrix to plot out ideas for your school, which together can form the basis of a comprehensive, evidence-based approach.

The examples on the next page are meant to inspire your thinking and guide the development of your own strategies. These ideas are starting points; there are endless possibilities for activities at various intersections on the matrix. Some activities may overlap across different areas, highlighting how these approaches complement each other and can work together to create a holistic strategy for promoting student health and reducing substance-related harms.

## Blueprint for Action Matrix - Example Activities

Use these examples as a starting point to spark your creativity. As you reflect on your school's needs and priorities, consider what activities you would include in your own Blueprint for Action matrix to best support your students and school community. See Appendix A for a blank version.

		SUBSTANCE USE INTERVENTION APPROACHES			
		UPSTREAM PREVENTION	HARM REDUCTION	STIGMA REDUCTION	EQUITY-ORIENTED
TEACHING AND LEARNING	SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	Empower staff to weave social-emotional learning into their curricula.	Display print materials designed by students that feature harm reduction messaging in common spaces within the school.	Organize training for staff and volunteers on anti-racism, anti-homophobia/transphobia, anti-oppression, and implicit bias.	Share the <a href="#">Brain Story toolkit</a> and other resources with your staff around adverse childhood experiences and their impact on brain development, learning, and substance use.
		Enable students to create inviting and inclusive communal spaces within the school.			Ensure accessibility in the school and surrounding areas, such as installing ramps and allowing extra time for students to reach classes.
PARTNERSHIPS AND SERVICES	POLICY	Work with community partners to increase access to youth programming (e.g. reduced rate workshops, open houses).	Rethink the use of exclusionary practices when addressing substance use and explore alternatives to suspension.	Revise school policies that contribute to systemic stigma around substance use, including punitive zero-tolerance policies.	Adapt policies to be more equity-oriented (e.g. allowing different styles of learning and testing).
		Invite local public health units or paramedics to educate on responding to medical distress from substance use.	Invite individuals with lived experience of substance use to share their perspectives with students.		

## Reflecting on School Policy

Strategies to reduce substance-related harms in schools should be rooted in evidence. Traditional approaches like zero-tolerance and abstinence-only policies, expulsion, suspension, and involving law enforcement have often proven ineffective and may inadvertently contribute to social harms related to substance use. The Blueprint for Action offers a framework not only for developing new policies but also for reevaluating and updating existing ones. Use the questions below to reflect on your current substance use policies through the lens of the Blueprint.

Do your school's current policies...

- contribute to a safe and welcoming school environment?
- encourage the development of social-emotional learning skills?
- take into account the unique needs related to culture, gender, and equity-deserving groups?
- reflect and require engagement from students, teachers, administrators, staff, parents and other stakeholders?
- take a whole-school approach and promote multi-level interventions that address both individual and environmental factors?
- respond to individual needs?

*“Keeping students involved in extracurricular sports and other engaging activities is a must. This provides another very meaningful opportunity to communicate and engage struggling youth in a safe and positive climate. **Staying involved is not a reward but is a way of modelling positive healthy behaviours.**”*

*- Elementary School Principal, Saskatchewan*

### Shift to Harm Reduction

Consider adopting a **harm reduction approach** that connects students with support services like counselling and treatment to address underlying issues.

### Enhance Wellbeing

Participation in sports and clubs enhances student **wellbeing and resilience**, providing protective factors against substance use.

### Support Peer Connections

Recognize that students often use substances to **strengthen peer bonds**. Supporting their involvement in extracurricular activities fosters belonging and connection.

### Adopt Progressive Discipline

Implement **progressive discipline approaches** that offer varied interventions, addressing substance-related harms while promoting a healthy learning environment.

## Policy as a Lever for Change

Administrators may not have full control over policy creation, but they play a crucial role in how policies are interpreted and implemented at the school level. Even small adjustments within their scope can have a significant impact on reducing punitive measures, improving student engagement, and fostering a healthier school culture.

### Upstream Prevention as a Policy Lever

While board-level policies establish a framework, administrators may have flexibility to adapt their implementation to concentrate on the root causes of substance use, such as stress or social isolation, and integrate protective factors into their approach. This cultivates an environment that empowers students to make healthier choices and fosters wellbeing.

EXAMPLE

Encourage your staff to embed social-emotional learning principals into the curriculum across all grade levels, providing students with skills to manage stress, build resilience, and develop healthy coping mechanisms.

### Harm Reduction through Policy

Policies that prioritize harm reduction over punitive measures create pathways for students to receive support and guidance rather than punishment. By integrating restorative approaches into disciplinary actions, schools can shift the narrative from blame and exclusion to one of healing and connection.

EXAMPLE

Instead of suspension for discipline, administrators can offer alternatives such as counselling, support groups, or restorative justice programs. This approach ensures that students remain connected to the school community.

### Stigma Reduction as a Policy Outcome

Administrators can reduce stigma by fostering open, supportive conversations instead of emphasizing judgement and punishment. By avoiding stigmatizing language, and creating safer spaces in and around your school, you can make it easier for a student to speak up, to feel understood, and to receive help.

EXAMPLE

In written and verbal school communications, replace terms like "drug abuse" with "substance use" and frame discussions around "supportive interventions" rather than "consequences" to emphasize empathy and understanding.

### Fostering Equity and Inclusivity

By reviewing policies through an equity lens, administrators can address systemic barriers and inequities that often contribute to disparities in student outcomes. Equity-oriented policies contribute to reducing stigma, addressing root causes of exclusion, and offering all students a sense of belonging and support within the school.

EXAMPLE

Designate school space for before- and after-school activities. Ensure these opportunities are accessible to all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, and encourage their participation to foster inclusivity.

## Alternatives to Suspension

One way to apply the Blueprint for Action is by rethinking the use of [exclusionary practices](#), such as suspensions, when addressing youth substance use. Traditional ‘zero-tolerance’ policies can undermine the welcoming environment and healthy relationships that serve as protective factors against substance-related harms, and can have disproportionately negative impacts on already-marginalized students such as Black and Indigenous youth. As a school administrator, you can promote a culture that prioritizes student health and wellbeing by exploring alternatives to suspension that align with the Blueprint’s intervention approaches. This creates a supportive environment that addresses substance use and fosters long-term student success.

### Examples of alternatives to suspension when students are found using substances at school:

#### Parent involvement/supervision

Engage parents to increase involvement in their child’s schooling and attunement to their child’s emotional state.

#### Problem solving/contracting

Assist students in identifying alternative choices with reinforcers for success and consequences for behaviours not aligned with school policy.

#### Behaviour monitoring

Monitor behaviour and academic progress with self-charting or feedback sessions with a trusted adult in the school community.

#### Counselling

Connect students with additional supports or individual counselling from trained professionals.

#### Mini courses or skill modules

Courses should be relevant and engaging with the intention of facilitating behaviour change.

#### Coordinated behaviour plans

Create a behaviour plan focused on increasing desirable behaviours and identifying alternative behaviours the student can engage in.

#### Alternative programing

Dependent on student need, alternatives could include changes to class schedule, independent study options or work experiences.

#### Community service

Connect with community services that allow students to perform supervised community service outside of school hours.

#### Restitution

Provide an opportunity to restore or improve the school environment impacted by the student’s behaviour (e.g. cleaning school grounds if found littering).


#### Appropriate in-school suspension


If there is no alternative, an in-school suspension can include academic tutoring, coursework related to substance-related harms, and a clearly defined procedure for returning to class.


Remember to use in-school suspensions as **an opportunity to restore relationships and provide personal support to the student in need.**


## Staff and Community Engagement


Every member of the school community plays a role in preventing substance-related harms. Administrators are especially important in how they can empower students and teachers by championing their initiatives. Involving staff, students, and the wider community, including parents and guardians, is vital for ensuring that initiatives are both practical and effective. If you encounter resistance, apply [adult learning principles](#) to help foster understanding and increase engagement among staff and community members.


 **Highlight Success Stories**  
Share success stories of schools that have effectively implemented similar policies or initiatives. Demonstrating positive outcomes can increase confidence and support for new initiatives.


 **Discuss Policy Goals**  
When discussing policies with families, emphasize that the goal is to create a supportive school environment that addresses the root causes of substance use, such as social isolation or stress.


 **Create Space for Dialogue**  
Encourage staff to ask questions and engage in open dialogue while reflecting on past student experiences with substances. This collaborative approach can support staff to better address similar situations in the future.

 **Conduct Regular Check-Ins**  
Plan for follow-up meetings or surveys to assess how staff and community members are adapting to new policies. Incorporate feedback with necessary adjustments and keep everyone engaged in the process.

 **Encourage Student Voice**  
Encourage students to voice their perspectives and take an active role in leading initiatives, as their involvement is crucial to ensuring the relevance and long-term success of school efforts.

 **Invite Experts to Speak**  
Bring in experts, such as public health professionals, researchers, and people with lived experience, to speak at staff meetings or parent gatherings to provide valuable insights and answer questions.

 **Leverage Existing Resources**  
Share resources from the [STOMP hub](#) that simplify key concepts for staff and families. Encourage staff to incorporate resources into their teaching where applicable.

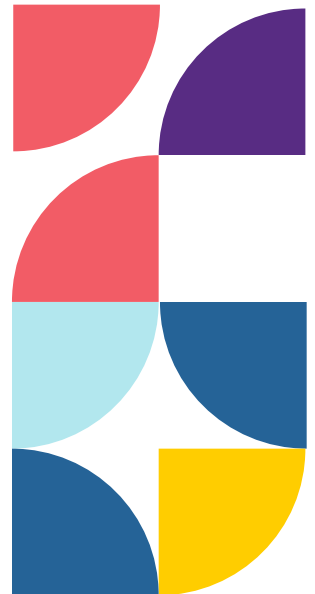
 **Celebrate Small Wins**  
Celebrate small wins in the implementation process, like increased participation or positive changes in student behavior, to maintain momentum and engagement.

## Take Action!

Substance use among students presents ongoing challenges in our schools, but you have the unique opportunity to lead the way in addressing and preventing substance-related harms. The Blueprint serves as a valuable evidence-based resource to help you craft effective strategies tailored to your school's specific needs. By leveraging these resources, you can develop targeted interventions that not only address immediate issues but also contribute to the long-term wellbeing and success of your students.

### Resources

- [Welcoming Environments: Preventing problematic substance use through positive youth development](#)
- [The Blueprint for Action](#)
- [Canadian Healthy School Standards](#)
- [Toolkit for Healthy Schools Leadership](#)
- [Comprehensive School Health Framework](#)
- [Preventing substance-related harms among Canadian youth through action within school communities: A policy paper](#)
- [Alternatives to Suspension in Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environments](#)
- [Alternatives to Suspensions: Rationale and Recommendations](#)
- [Why Should Schools Move Away From Punitive Responses?](#)
- [Adult Learning Principles Overview](#)
- [STOMP Hub](#)
- [Health Canada Experiences](#)
- [Understanding Substance Use: Educators Guide](#)



Public Health  
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## Appendix A - Blueprint for Action Matrix

Use the Blueprint for Action matrix to reflect on and map out targeted activities that align with your school community's specific needs and priorities

SUBSTANCE USE INTERVENTION APPROACHES				
	UPSTREAM PREVENTION	HARM REDUCTION	STIGMA REDUCTION	EQUITY-ORIENTED
TEACHING AND LEARNING				
SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT				
POLICY				
PARTNERSHIPS AND SERVICES				