Welcoming Environments

School communities can help to prevent problematic substance use among students by fostering welcoming environments.

Cannabis use for non-medical purposes is now legal for those 18 years or older in Canada, depending on the province or territory. Youth have been learning about the health risks associated with cannabis use through various channels, including the curriculum and various public education and awareness campaigns on the potential health and safety risks of cannabis use. However, we know that knowledge-focused initiatives are limited in their ability to prevent problematic substance use and its related harms. There is an opportunity to complement these traditional approaches to preventing problematic substance use through active efforts to promote youths' overall well-being.

Well-being is commonly described as experiencing positive emotions and moods, being satisfied with life, feeling fulfilled and engaging and being interested in daily activities. Likewise, when people are flourishing, can cope with difficulties, believe in themselves, feel a sense of belonging and believe they have something to contribute, they have a high degree of well-being. Research shows that a high degree of well-being is protective against problematic substance use among youth.

Administrators can foster a welcoming, supportive environment by applying a whole-school model that incorporates well-being as a vital aspect of student success. The Comprehensive School Health Framework[1] recognizes the importance of reinforcing messages and actions that promote health and well-being through numerous channels.

For example, school communities can enhance students' well-being by 1) Adopting **policies** that discourage negative behaviours and actions and facilitate appropriate support for students' struggling with poor mental health, problematic substance use and other challenges; 2) Working closely with other adults within the school community, students, families and community organizations to create and/or **strengthen partnerships and services** that reflect and respond to the school community's diversity and needs; 3) Creating a positive **social and physical environment** in the school by funding, promoting and participating in regular, inclusive community-building school events and activities; and 4) Supporting school staff in adopting **teaching and learning** practices that are culturally responsive and enhance social-emotional learning.

Student well-being is enhanced when adults within the school community cultivate positive social and learning environments. This includes fostering safe, inclusive and welcoming environments by addressing negative behaviours and actions (e.g., bullying, harassment, prejudice and discrimination) and promoting respect for individual differences. When the school community recognizes and embraces students' varied identities and experiences (e.g., ethnicity and race, gender, faith, ability and mental health, sexuality, socioeconomic status and citizenship) and engage in culturally responsive teaching, they foster a positive school climate that supports students' well-being and resilience.

All school staff can develop caring and supportive relationships with students by setting aside time for each student, asking them about their non-academic interests, remembering details about their lives and responding to their needs in a timely manner.

For further information on this topic, check out our series, Preventing Problematic Substance Use Through Positive Youth Development, which can be found at https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/research/positive-youth-development.html.

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1 Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health. Comprehensive School Health Framework. (2018). Retrieved from http://www.jcsh-cces.ca/index.php/about/comprehensive-school-health