Reaching the tipping point: Supporting Canadian school stakeholders to build on programs that work for positive youth development and prevention of problematic substance use

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project aimed to increase Canadian school stakeholders' interest and engagement to adapt and extend effective interventions that are aimed at youth between 11-18 years of age. These interventions addressed upstream risk and protective factors related to early and frequent use of cannabis, broader problematic substance use, as well as other adverse social and health outcomes like violence and risky sexual behaviours.

The Centre for School Mental Health at Western University and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) have partnered to develop a series of resources for school communities to promote positive youth development (PYD) through school-based initiatives. Following an extensive literature review and consultations from diverse stakeholders, three key themes emerged to guide the development of these resources: (1) *promoting well-being*, (2) *creating welcoming environments*, and (3) *effective programming*.

INTRODUCTION

The recent legalization of cannabis, the ongoing opioid crisis, and the growing attention to the costly social and health harms associated with alcohol use have sparked considerable discussion within the education system on the role of schools in addressing youths' risk of problematic substance use.

Traditional approaches to achieving this goal have centred on increasing youths' understanding of the health risks associated with substance use. Problematic substance use is complex and shaped by numerous factors that can make youth more likely to use substances in ways that are harmful, including having poor mental health, limited social support, and experiences of adversity, trauma, violence and abuse.

School-based efforts to enhance youths' well-being and promote PYD are an important complement to traditional health education. The role of school administrators and educators in ensuring students are safe, supported and ready to learn has long been appreciated.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

1. Conducted a systematic literature review on risk and protective factors for problematic substance use and PYD interventions
   - Submitted a written report to PHAC
2. Consulted with a National Steering Committee to develop key messages
3. Developed and disseminated knowledge translation (KT) products

METHODS

Literature Review
- A search of the peer-reviewed and grey literature from 2008 onwards was conducted of (1) risk and protective factors associated with substance use, and (2) PYD interventions that target the protective factors associated with reduced problematic substance use.

Consultations
- We convened a national steering committee with representatives from 12 organizations to provide guidance throughout the project. Individual interviews were conducted with our committee to help distill the key messages.

Feedback Process
- Following the development of the KT products, several focus groups were conducted with stakeholders (i.e., representing educators, administrators, mental health professionals, researchers, and government organizations).

FINDINGS

Promote Well-Being

Promoting youths' well-being involves increasing protective factors that can buffer risk of problematic substance use.

- Provide opportunities for youth to engage in prosocial behaviour (e.g., volunteering)[1]
- Provide opportunities for skill-building[1,2]
- Encourage students' sense of hope[1]
- Foster stable and caring relationships with supportive adults[1]

Create Welcoming Environments

The foundation for a welcoming environment includes healthy, supportive relationships and a safe, inclusive school climate.

- Apply a whole-school model that incorporates well-being as a vital aspect of student success[3]
- Create safe, inclusive and welcoming learning environments[4]
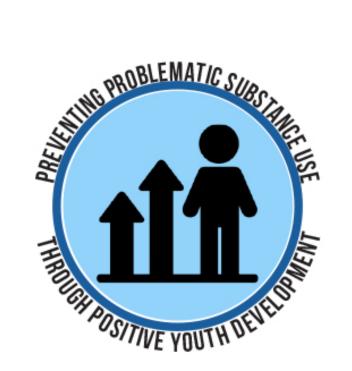- Partake in anti-oppressive training and create a culture where diversity is expected and respected

Integrate Effective Programs

There are effective universal school-based programs that can reduce youths' risk of problematic substance use by supporting PYD.

- Connect with organizations that offer PYD programs and other resources
- Implement PYD programs in your school through research and knowledge mobilization opportunities
- Try different classroom strategies that support PYD

Funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada

DELIVERABLES

Infographic
This presents a high-level overview of all three key messages.

Newsletters & Research briefs
The newsletters provide high-level information on each key message. The research briefs provide detailed supporting evidence and strategies for each key message.

Whiteboard videos
These videos present high-level overviews of each key message.

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Successes
1. The approach of the project clearly resonated with all stakeholders involved. This was evident through the consultation and feedback processes and willingness of partners to help disseminate the KT products of the projects.
2. Staggering feedback and consultation allowed the team to respond to feedback in successive iterations. Flexibility on the part of the funder allowed us to be responsive to significant changes posited by stakeholders.
3. Engagement with national stakeholders led to significant uptake of resources in a short timeframe. Full impact and accurate estimates of products distributed will not be known for another 6-12 months.

Challenges
1. The availability and timing of feedback could have been more advantageous. Timing of consultations were determined by availability of the groups and organizations.
2. There was a tension between evidence-based and evidence-informed. Many resources have been derived from existing research, but have not been directly evaluated. In addition, there are frameworks that have been widely adopted by policy makers but not evaluated. Different stakeholders use the term evidence-based to mean different things, and it was important for us to be clear about our use of terms.
3. The highly iterative nature of feedback and revision process made some knowledge products very work intensive. In particular, the whiteboard videos were virtually re-constructed each time based on successive rounds of feedback.

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