



Substance Use and School: Opportunities to Support Students

A guide for educators and school system leaders about youth substance use

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Introduction to the Guide

Having conversations about substance use with students and providing support to students experiencing substance use and/or mental health challenges is a reality for many working in education. The purpose of this guide is to support educators and school system leaders in their knowledge about substance use and supports available for students. This resource also offers recommendations for action and considerations for working across student, school and community levels.

This guide was developed by Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario (YWHO) in collaboration with youth, School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) and the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) team at CAMH.

Working with Students



Build Your Knowledge

Learn more about student perspectives and experiences with substance use. Students will have different attitudes, experiences and levels of knowledge about substance use. Understanding what information students would like to know about substance use can inform your work and future discussions with students.

Reflect on student identities and experiences. How can you support experiences of diverse youth and be mindful of offering additional support to those who may be most impacted by substance use? Students also have different needs and levels of comfort when talking about substance use and reaching out for support from others.

Reflect on your own identity and experience and knowledge of substance use. This can identify any biases that you may have that could impact your approach to working with students. You should also identify your own knowledge gaps and opportunities for learning.

Considerations in Your Work with Students

Approach conversations about substance use in a non-judgmental way. Approach students with a sense of curiosity, rather than making assumptions about their experiences.

When offering support to students, ensure that they are able to make decisions for themselves. Work collaboratively with students to identify the type of support they are interested in and different options that may be available for them. Remember that sometimes students may only be looking to be heard and may not want a solution.

Consider when cultural or identity-specific supports are appropriate. Receiving support from a student's own community may be helpful for some youth, whether this is through peer support or professionals in your school and community.

Working within Your School



Build Your Knowledge

Identify mental health and substance resources that are available within your school. This may be mental health professionals, mental health leads and your school's service pathway.

Understand your school board's policies relating to mental health and substance use. This includes knowing your responsibility to disclose information relating to student mental health and substance use and information about **Drug and Alcohol Policies in Ontario Schools**, such as the Safe Schools Act and the Ontario Code of Conduct.

Reflect on the impact of school policies on students. Do the policies and how they are followed best address student's needs and well-being? Consider if some policies may disproportionately impact some students more than others and how this can be mitigated.

YWHO's resource for educators and school system leaders, 'Substance Use and School: What Youth Want Educators to Know', offers practical information about youth experiences with substance use, along with recommendations and resources for those working with students and supporting substance use education in schools. See School Mental Health Ontario's **'One Call Desk Reference'** for information on how to identify and support conversations with students about mental health.^{2,3}

Considerations in Your Work in Schools

Work collaboratively with students on substance use education. Students can be engaged to advise on substance use education in schools. Other individuals with lived experience are valuable educators too. Explore collaboration/consultation opportunities with your school-based support staff to guide you in class-wide education.

Ensure that students are aware of the mental health and substance use resources that are available within your school. It is appropriate to initiate conversations about mental health or substance use with students if you are concerned about their well-being. Find opportunities to encourage conversations with students about these topics in general. Students should also be aware of supports that they can reach out to themselves directly.

You are not alone in offering support to students. You have colleagues around you who bring diverse expertise and can support your work with students, including your school mental health team and school social worker. You don't have to have all of the answers. Reach out to others for consultation or refer youth to mental health supports in your school.

Be honest and transparent about your capacity to support students. A lack of clarity around how a student's own experiences may be held in confidence can be a barrier for them when they are considering seeking support, so it is helpful for them to be aware of this in advance. Let students know your own boundaries and responsibilities to disclose certain information to others.

Working Within Your Community



Build Your Knowledge

Learn more about the community your school is situated within. Who is part of the community? What are young people experiencing? Are there higher or increasing rates for use of certain substances? Have events happened in the community that may influence student perspectives about substances or motivations to use substances? Having a better understanding of the community identity can inform your work with students and in your school.

Identify the resources that are available in your community. This includes existing community partnerships that your school may have with programs that support youth mental health and substance use. Your community partners may also bring diverse expertise, including work with youth from specific cultures, identities or experiences.

Considerations in Your Work with Your Community

Work collaboratively with your community partners. Rely on partnerships in your community to support your work with students. You may collaborate with partners to support student education or bridge students to these supports, if appropriate. You can also increase awareness among students about the community resources that are available for them to access outside of school.

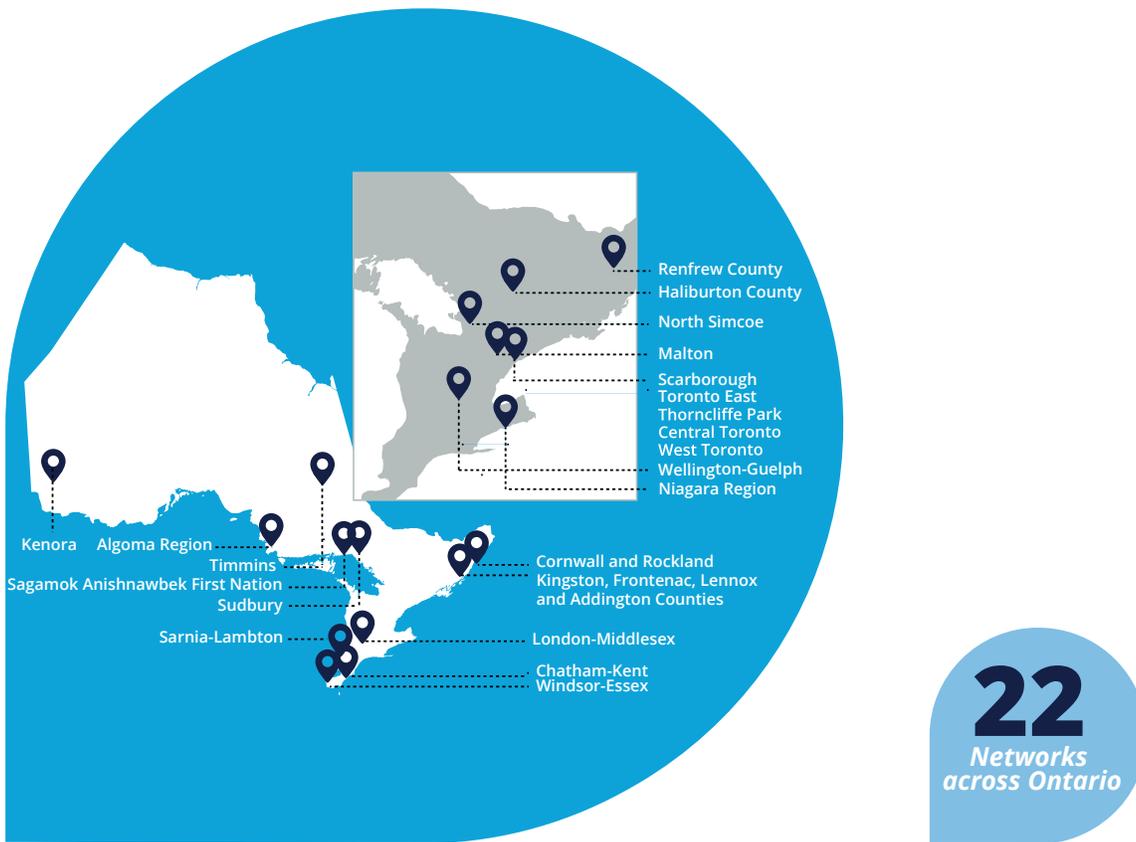
You can find regional mental health, substance use and well-being supports for youth through:

[Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#)

[Children's Mental Health Ontario: Find Help in Your Community](#)

[Kids Help Phone: Resources Around Me](#)

[Connex Ontario \(1-866-531-2600\)](#)



About Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario

Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario (YWHO) is a network of 22 local hubs that provide integrated services co-designed with youth for youth in communities across the province. Provincially funded and philanthropically supported since 2017, YWHO was established to address gaps in the youth mental health and substance use service system by providing fully integrated “one-stop shops” for youth aged 12-25, addressing needs related to mental health, substance use, primary care, education, employment, housing, peer support, outreach, system navigation, and other community and social programming.

Through a commitment to rapid and low-barrier access, early and evidence-based interventions, equitable and culturally effective services, and meaningful youth and family engagement, YWHO is taking a critical step forward to improve Ontario’s youth mental health system.

To learn more about Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario, visit www.youthhubs.ca or [@YWHOntario](https://www.facebook.com/YWHOntario) on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, or find a local YWHO site near you.



References

- ¹ CAMH. (2008). CAMH Knowledge Exchange Archive: Drug and Alcohol Policies in Ontario Schools. Retrieved August 10, 2022, from <https://www.porticonetwork.ca/web/knowledgex-archive/educators/secondary-grades/educating-students-drug-use-mental-health/drug-alcohol-policies-ontario-schools>
- ² Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario. (2022). Substance use and School: What Youth Want Educators to Know About Substance Use. Retrieved October 27th 2022, from <https://youthhubs.ca/os-duhs-youth-substance-use-resources-for-educators/>
- ³ School Mental Health Ontario. (n.d.). One Call Desk Reference. Retrieved August 10, 2022, from <https://smho-smso.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/One-Call.pdf>



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