



# **Substance Use and School: What Youth Want Educators to Know**

**A resource for school and  
system leaders and educators  
about youth substance use  
and available resources**

**youth  
wellness  
hubs**

ONTARIO

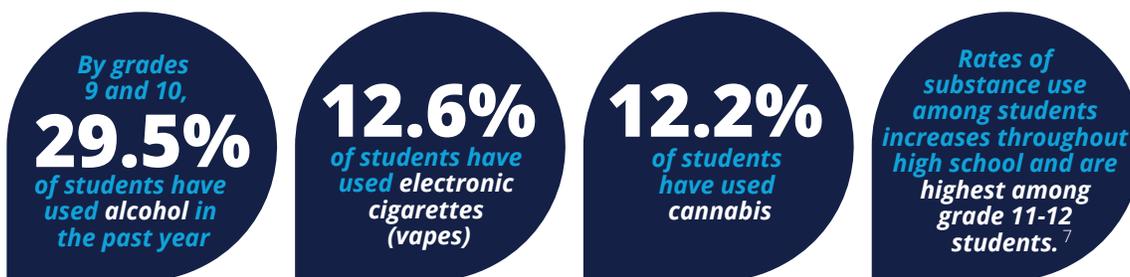
# Introduction

During adolescence, more than 80% of youth will experiment with drugs or alcohol.<sup>1</sup> Young people aged 15-24 are more likely to experience mental illness and/or substance use disorders than any other age group.<sup>2</sup> Youth are also more likely to report harm because of substance use.<sup>3</sup> Substance use in adolescence can dysregulate important brain function, increase vulnerability to mental health concerns and school disengagement, and is correlated with later problematic substance use.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Comprehensive substance use education and support is critical for youth during this transitional period.

This resource was developed by Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario (YWHO), in collaboration with School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON), the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) team at CAMH, and a Youth Reference Group made up of seven youth from across Ontario. This resource provides an overview of experiences with substance use and substance use education that members of the Youth Reference Group shared over a series of seven meetings. It also provides practical recommendations and information for those working with students and supporting substance use education in schools. Moreover, included are findings from the 2021 OSDUHS, which is a population survey of Ontario students in grades 7 through 12 that is conducted every two years. A total of 2,225 students in grades 7 to 12 from 122 schools in 31 school boards participated in the 2021 cycle of the OSDUHS.

## Realities of Youth Substance Use and Education

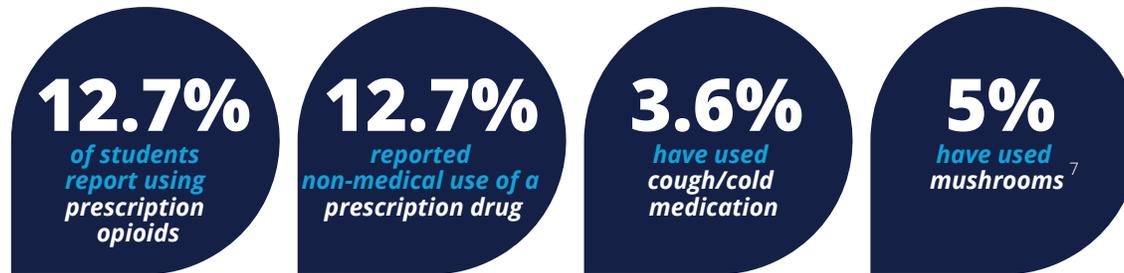
**Substance use can feel like a “rite of passage” for many youth.** Many youth will experiment with alcohol and different drugs. The 2021 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS) showed that:



In our discussions with young people on the Youth Reference Group, they described how the secondary school experience can be closely tied to substance use, introducing additional pressure on students to do things to fit in or be a ‘real high school kid’. Youth explained that they feel that substance use has been normalized, and sometimes glamorized in the media, online and among their peer group. Youth may experience more indirect pressure to use substances during this stage of life, rather than direct pressure to use drugs from their peers.

### **Youth feel they are not getting the right information about substance use at school.**

Young people in the Youth Reference Group expressed that there are limited conversations about substance use in school. They felt that when conversations occur, they are usually focused on drinking and smoking weed; however, students have experiences that involve other drugs and would like educators to talk about these drugs as well. According to the 2021 OSDUHS:



Youth also spoke about hearing messaging in schools indicating that ‘drugs are bad and will ruin your life.’ They described that framing substance use using a one-sided approach, or that drugs are only harmful, is not appropriate or helpful.

**Youth use substances for many different reasons.** Although youth may use substances to socialize and experiment, members of the Youth Reference Group identified that previous trauma, loneliness, anxiety, depression, ADHD, and boredom are a few other reasons why they participate in drug use. Substance use can be a way to self-medicate, cope or pass time. According to the 2021 OSDUHS, almost one-third (30%) of students report low subjective social status at school (i.e., feeling that other students exclude them and do not respect them). About half (47%) of students indicate a moderate-to-serious level of psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression), and over one-quarter (26%) indicate a serious level of psychological distress.<sup>7</sup> Students who experience stigma, oppression and discrimination may also be more likely to use substances. Adolescence can be a very challenging time for many young people, and substance use may not always be a way to act out or have fun; a student could be struggling and need more support.

**Youth want to feel more comfortable to reach out for more support if needed.** The 2021 OSDUHS reported that just under half (42%) of students report that, in the past year, there was a time they wanted to talk to someone about a mental health problem, but did not know where to turn. Members of the Youth Reference Group described that youth may want to talk openly about their mental health and substance use with a safe and trusted adult, however, they may feel that they will be judged. Youth stated that fear of consequences or disciplinary action for substance use is another reason why reaching out for help can be something they avoid. Youth also described experiences where they had shared information in confidence with an educator and were unaware of their responsibility to disclose certain information, which led to a breakdown of trust.

# Recommendations and Resources for School and System Leaders and Educators

1

**Substance use education must begin with students when they are younger, especially before students reach grade 8.**

The Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum has recommendations for substance use education among students as early as grade 1, including promoting self-awareness, identifying and managing emotions, and learning to cope with challenges. By grade 8, students should be learning about the relationship between mental health and substance use, and the harms and risks associated with particular substances.<sup>9</sup> Equipping students with this information and skills early on supports health promotion and substance use prevention.

2

**Substance use education cannot be a one-time discussion with students; it must be woven throughout students' entire experience at school.**

While specific education about substance use with students is an expectation within the Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum, student health and well-being can also be supported in a variety of ways. Consider how the environment that students experience at school, school board policies and evidence-based practices can intersect to support student well-being. This approach can also help students develop safer coping and critical thinking skills, and build their support network. Review the Public Health Agency of Canada's **Blueprint for Action: Preventing Substance-Related Harms Among Youth Through a Comprehensive School Health Approach** or **A Blueprint for Action – In Short** to learn more.<sup>10</sup> Work with your school and community partners to complete The Blueprint for Action model "in practice" and apply this approach to your local context. School Mental Health Ontario also offers the MH LIT – Mental Health in Action course for **educators** and an additional course for **school leaders**. These courses provide basic knowledge and information related to mental health, strategies to enhance student mental health, and everyday practices that can be used in the school and classroom.<sup>11,12</sup>

3

**Conversations about substance use need to be multifaceted, including information about multiple substances and in a balanced manner.**

According to the 2021 OSDUHS, students are using a variety of substances beyond alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis.<sup>7</sup> Educators should keep informed about substances youth may be exposed to, including those growing in prevalence, like prescription opioids or nicotine vaping. Incorporate conversations relating to a variety of substances in your work with students and learn more about substances that youth may be exposed to by using **CAMH's Mental Illness and Addiction Index**.<sup>13</sup>

Substance use education needs to balance messaging about risks with realistic information about the effects of substance use. Leaving out information can heighten young people's mistrust in the messages they receive. A lack of information may also limit a young person's ability to keep themselves safe if/when exposed to substances, increasing their risk of harm. The Canadian Centre for Substance Use and Addiction's **"Understanding Substance Use: Educator's Guide"** (2022) has more information to address stigma, identify when substance use may become problematic, and tips for supporting youth.<sup>14</sup> You can also offer more information about harm reduction and how youth can keep themselves and their friends safe if they choose to use. Learn more about harm reduction and safer substance use through Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy's **Know Your Drugs 101**.<sup>15</sup>

## 4

**Consider how a student's life experiences, identity and challenges they may be facing can have an impact on their experience in school, and what additional support may be helpful for them and your broader school community.**

An equity-oriented approach is inclusive of student ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, neurodiversity, mental health, and experiences of trauma. Look for opportunities to support equity, diversity and inclusion and a trauma-informed approach through school policy and environment, student support services (e.g., social work, psychology staff), student engagement, and specific learning opportunities and resources for students and educators. This may include celebrating student identity through activities or clubs, being mindful of language used within the school, supporting training opportunities for anti-oppressive, inclusive and trauma-informed practices, and being aware of community specific resources that are available for diverse youth experiences.

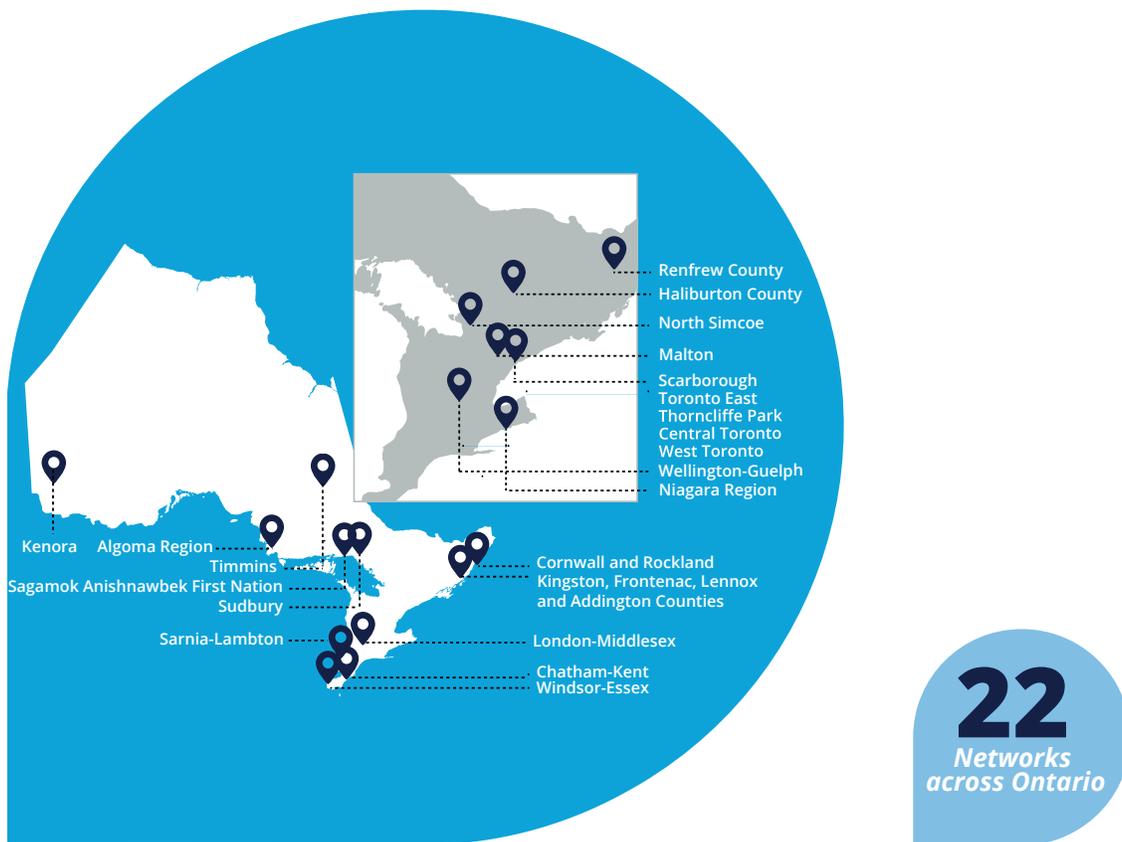
The **Preventing Problematic Substance Use Through Positive Youth Development** resource at Western Centre for School Mental Health provides more information about ways to promote student well-being, create welcoming environments and develop effective programming centering equity.<sup>16</sup> You can also learn more about incorporating trauma-informed practices through Education Northwest's **Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide**, including questions to guide the development of trauma-informed practices and strategies for trauma-informed teaching.<sup>17</sup>

## 5

**Support conversations with students about mental health and substance use as a trusted adult, and share that you are open to hearing their experiences without judgement.**

It can be intimidating for students to reach out for help when they need it. School environments and educators can encourage feelings of safety for students. Communicate the support that is available for students and indicate that you are a person they can speak with and who can connect them to additional resources for more support. Respond to students without stigma or judgment and react with compassion, understanding and information. Be transparent about your responsibilities to disclose certain information (e.g., safety concerns).

See YWHO's resource for educators and school system leaders, '**Substance Use and School: Opportunities to support students**', and School Mental Health Ontario's **One-Call Desk Reference and Reflection Tool for Educators** for practical information on how to identify and support conversations with students about mental health and build a mentally healthy class community.<sup>18,19,20</sup>



## 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](http://www.youthhubs.ca) or [@YWHOntario](https://www.facebook.com/YWHOntario) on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, or find a local YWHO site near you.



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