Welcoming Environments

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

What the RESEARCH says:

The school climate can have a profound impact on students' well-being and risk of problematic substance use.

A positive school climate actively promotes healthy behaviours and social interactions. It exists when all members of the school community feel safe, included, respected and accepted [1]. The school climate is dynamic and shaped in large part by the people, policies, practices and programs within the school community.

In addition to contributing to the school climate, these elements of school communities can be bolstered to prevent problematic substance use by enhancing important protective factors (e.g., self-efficacy, social connectedness, school engagement and healthy relationships with supportive adults) among students. Many of these protective factors also reflect important resources that support well-being. Positive school climates are also associated with healthy social norms related to substance use (i.e., which neither stigmatizes nor glamourizes substance use) [2].

Healthy, supportive relationships are the foundation of a positive school climate.

A key component of a positive school climate is healthy, supportive relationships between students and non-parental adults, including teachers, administrators and other school staff. These relationships can buffer risk of problematic substance use and other negative outcomes (e.g., conduct problems and risky sexual behaviours) among youth.

Adults in school communities can serve as formal or informal mentors, providing youth with guidance and social and emotional support. These relationships are unique, since these adults are able to offer resources that peers may be unable to provide (e.g., referrals to counseling for mental health problems or problematic substance use) and youth may prefer to discuss some topics with non-parental (vs. parental) adults, due to fears of embarrassment or reprisal in their family [3].

These relationships can stoke youths' self-esteem, feelings of social support, self-efficacy and control, as well as sense of accountability [3], which are protective factors that reduce risk of problematic substance use. Similarly, adults in school communities can directly or indirectly encourage youth to adopt healthy, positive behaviours, attitudes and interests, while avoiding risk behaviours like problematic substance use [4].

For more information and additional resources, please visit:
https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/research/positive-youth-development.html

Public Health Agency of Canada   Agence de la santé publique du Canada

Western   Centre for School Mental Health

Positive school climates are inclusive and protect and celebrate diverse identities.

Youth have unique lived experiences and diverse identities (e.g., based on ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability and faith, as well as the intersections of these identities). Though all students need safe and nurturing school environments, this is a particular concern for students that routinely experience discrimination and marginalization. Research reveals that 97.1% of Canadian teachers believe their school is 'safe' [5], yet 64.2% of LGBTQ2* students feel unsafe at school [6], suggesting more can be done to be inclusive and protect students.

School communities are well-poised to address concerns around students' safety and inclusion. For example, school communities can recognize the complexity and diversity of students' identities, affirm students' lived experiences in social interactions and classroom activities, use inclusive language, address negative language and behaviour and integrate varying experiences and perspectives in everyday teaching.

Efforts to support the well-being of marginalized students can help foster a positive school climate that benefits all students. For example, students who attend a school with a Gender and Sexuality Alliances/Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) report feeling safer and experiencing a greater sense of belonging at school, hear fewer homophobic comments, indicate that their school is more supportive of LGBTQ2 students and can identify more supportive teachers [5,7]. Further, LGBTQ2 students who attend schools with GSAs experience less discrimination and victimization [6].

There are unique strategies school communities can use to enhance well-being and reduce problematic substance use among Indigenous youth. These include cultivating cultural identity and connectedness and facilitating engagement with traditional cultural activities (e.g., ceremonies and cultural events, classes on Indigenous languages and education on traditional food preparation or singing/dancing).

* Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Two-Spirit

Strategies school communities can adopt to foster a welcoming environment

Apply the Comprehensive School Health Framework to inform school-based efforts to promote well-being

Welcoming environments can be fostered by applying a whole-school model focused on enhancing youths' well-being. For example, the Comprehensive School Health Framework is an internationally-recognized approach to supporting improvements in students' educational outcomes while addressing school health in a planned, integrated and holistic way [8]. The Framework suggests school communities can use numerous complementary channels to enhance students' well-being.

Administrators are uniquely positioned to champion comprehensive school-based approaches to supporting positive youth development by:

- Adopting <u>policies</u> that discourage negative behaviours and actions and facilitate appropriate support for students struggling with poor mental health, problematic substance use and other challenges;

- Working closely with other adults within the school community, students, families and community organizations to create and/or strengthen <u>partnerships and services</u> that reflect and respond to the school community's diversity and needs;

- Creating a positive <u>social and physical environment</u> in the school by funding, promoting and participating in regular, inclusive community-building school events and activities; and

- Supporting school staff to adopt <u>teaching and learning practices</u> that are culturally responsive and enhance social-emotional learning.

Create safe, inclusive and welcoming learning environments

School communities can foster an environment in which everyone feels safe, included and welcomed through school policies and practices, features of the built environment and attention to everyday interactions with and between students.

Administrators can create, recognize and celebrate diversity through attention to inclusive language in school communications, the use and decoration of physical space, supporting course offerings reflective of diversity, engaging in inclusive and equitable hiring practices and supporting school events. Administrators can create mechanisms for others in the school community (e.g., students, school councils, parents and community partners) to provide ongoing input and leadership in initiatives to create a safe, inclusive and positive school climate for all.

Teachers can nurture the cultural uniqueness of each student (e.g., displaying positive space posters and developing class guidelines with students and enforcing them) and construct learning and social environments where all youth feel included, valued and represented.

All members of school communities can participate in professional development to increase their capacity to recognize and respond to bullying and harassment among students. They can cultivate safe, inclusive and welcoming schools by addressing negative behaviours and actions (e.g., bullying, harassment, prejudice and discrimination) and promoting respect for and understanding of individual differences at school and beyond.

Partake in anti-oppressive training and infuse learnings in teaching to create a culture where diversity is expected and respected

There is a growing recognition of the continuing harms associated with oppression, racism and other forms of discrimination, including harms related to the well-being of youth. This attention has coincided with the development of a wealth of resources on how to actively address these significant social issues within school communities.

Administrators can encourage and facilitate training for teachers and other staff related to anti-racism and anti-oppression (ARAO), cultural competency and recognizing and addressing implicit bias and other forms of systemic discrimination that impede students' sense of safety and well-being at school. Administrators can also seek out supports to help integrate culturally responsive pedagogy throughout their programming and share related learning opportunities with staff. Administrators should consider such pedagogy when coaching and supporting staff through annual learning plans and formal performance appraisals.

Teachers can infuse multiple experiences and perspectives in teachings to promote respect for and understanding of diversity. For example, teachers can use this culturally responsive teaching resource to understand how to engage students with varying learning backgrounds, strengths, needs and interests. Further, various books written by Indigenous authors, lesson plans that highlight Indigenous understandings and teachings and Truth and Reconciliation resources are readily available for teachers to integrate in their classes. Teachers can also refer to Creating Indigenous-Themed Lessons when creating a classroom culture where diversity is expected and respected.

All members of school communities can participate in ARAO training and cultural competency and use learnings to address individual and institutionalized oppression in and through education. They can also participate in professional development about inclusive language and other strategies for creating a welcoming, positive school climate. Likewise, everyone can participate in events that celebrate diversity and learn more about the different identities of their students. Members of school communities should express their high expectations for all students and affirm their cultures and lived experiences in everyday teaching and interactions.

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