

## **Prevention for Stronger Schools**

A powerful tool for preventing youth substance misuse already exists in our communities: schools. When we invest in school-based prevention, we're not just helping students avoid harmful substances—we're helping build stronger, healthier, more connected communities. The resources collected here elevate the role and impact these efforts have on our communities by helping you engage with school administration and boards, families, community organizations, and other decision makers.

## Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools

### 6 Key Points

#### 1. Position schools as essential environments for prevention.

When people think about where substance misuse prevention should happen, they don't always think of schools first. But when you consider the amount of time spent in school and the role that environment plays in shaping behaviors, relationships and decision-making, the school setting becomes a natural, invaluable setting for early, sustained prevention.

In Vermont, Student Assistance Professionals (SAPs) and evidence-informed school policies help schools provide direct support, connect families with services, and build systems that promote student success. These approaches strengthen resilience and mental wellness, often aligning with health education and behavioral supports. The Association of Student Assistance Professionals of Vermont (ASAPVT) notes that SAPs increase ties between students and communities and teach “life” skills, while decreasing absenteeism and disciplinary actions, while the [CDC's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child \(WSCC\) framework](#) reinforces the essential connection between student health and academic performance.

#### Key Messages:

**“Substance misuse prevention starts with the spaces where students spend their time—and schools are one of the most powerful of those spaces.”**

**“Schools shape students’ skills, relationships, and decisions. That makes them essential partners in prevention.”**

**“A strong school culture is prevention. When students feel supported, connected, and seen, they’re more likely to thrive—and less likely to engage in risky behaviors.”**

These messages help people understand that prevention should be embedded in the school experience, not separate from it. They also reinforce the idea that prevention isn't only about understanding risks—it's about creating the conditions for resilience.

## Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools

### 6 Key Points

#### 2. Connect prevention efforts to greater student health and community well-being.

Conversations about substance misuse prevention often focus too narrowly on reducing use. But school-based prevention does far more—it supports students' physical and mental health, shapes social norms, and strengthens communities from the ground up.

You can help shift public thinking by emphasizing prevention as part of a broader public health strategy. Prevention isn't just a curriculum—it's a tool for helping young people grow into healthier, more resilient adults.

Prevention also shapes perception. Data from the [Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#) shows that students who believe substances are harmful—and who know their peers and parents disapprove—are less likely to use them. School culture around substance misuse can influence this perception, especially when prevention is embedded in health education and reinforced across the entire school system.

[Research](#) shows that schools using evidence-based prevention programs see measurable reductions in substance misuse. Just as important, these programs help students navigate peer pressure, build decision-making skills, and feel more confident in their ability to lead. Many students go on to advocate for prevention initiatives in their schools and communities.

And when schools identify students using substances, they're often catching early signs of deeper challenges—academic stress, mental health issues, or social disconnection. Early intervention matters, not just to stop use, but to support the whole student before harm escalates.

#### Key Messages:

**“School-based prevention strengthens student health, both mental and physical.”**

**“Prevention is not just about avoiding harm—it's about building lifelong skills like confidence, resilience, and decision-making.”**

**“When students lead prevention efforts, they become advocates for change and take ownership of their health and their communities.”**

## Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools

### 6 Key Points

**“Integrated, consistent prevention creates a ripple effect that benefits students, families, and communities alike.”**

Together, these messages reframe prevention as a long-term investment in student health, leadership, and resilience—not just a strategy to reduce risk, but a foundation for stronger schools and healthier communities.

## Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools

### 6 Key Points

#### 3. Prioritize early and consistent prevention for long-term student success.

Public understanding of prevention often centers on high school—when substance misuse becomes more visible. But [research shows](#) that prevention efforts are most effective when they begin early and are sustained consistently across grade levels and school environments.

You can strengthen support by making the case for early, whole-school prevention, led by trusted professionals who help students build resilience before risks escalate. Programs led by Student Assistance Professionals (SAPs), along with school-wide approaches like restorative practices, offer a proactive, relationship-based model that improves health, academic outcomes, and school climate.

Starting in elementary school, important parts of prevention curriculum include the development of life skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, and problem solving. As students move into middle school, more age-appropriate education builds on that foundation—focusing on managing social conflict, making healthy decisions under peer pressure, and understanding the impact of substance misuse on their brain and future. When lessons start early and continue throughout school, prevention becomes part of the culture—not just a one-time lesson or reaction to a problem.

The [CDC’s Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child \(WSCC\) framework](#) supports this approach, emphasizing that prevention is most effective when it engages students holistically—academically, socially, emotionally, and physically—and involves collaboration between schools, families, and communities.

#### Key Messages:

**“Prevention is most effective when it begins early, before harmful behaviors take root.”**

**“Consistent, school-wide prevention strategies improve academic outcomes and school climate.”**

**“Prevention efforts in elementary and middle school help create resiliency and life skills that benefit students as they grow and face greater challenges.”**

## Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools

### 6 Key Points

**“Prevention is not an isolated effort—it works best when integrated across the entire school experience and is supported by families and communities.”**

Together, these messages position prevention as a proactive, long-term strategy that supports healthier students, stronger relationships, and a more positive school environment.

## Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools

### 6 Key Points

#### 4. Use research and real stories to show prevention's lasting impact.

When making the case for school-based substance misuse prevention, data matters—and so do the stories. You can be most effective when you pair strong evidence with compelling, real-world examples that show how prevention works across schools and communities.

Evidence-based programs like [Project Alert](#) and [Project Towards No Drug Abuse](#) have been shown to reduce substance misuse among students—including alcohol, cannabis, tobacco and other drugs—with effects that can last up to six years. These programs don't rely on fear or scare tactics. Instead, they teach decision-making, self-awareness, and emotional resilience—skills students carry into adulthood.

Just as important are the stories playing out across Vermont. Students are presenting at school boards, speaking at national conferences, and leading peer-to-peer programs like Hope Happens Here, which fosters connection and mental health awareness across middle and high schools. Schools have reported truancy levels dropping with the expansion of support services. SAPs reported more students seeking help on their own—proof that when prevention is embedded in trust, students engage.

Prevention also strengthens schools beyond individual behavior. It boosts confidence and academic outcomes, lowers disciplinary issues, and improves overall climate. According to a [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) report, it's also one of the most cost-effective long-term investments—saving up to \$18 for every \$1 spent.

#### Key Messages:

**“School-based prevention is backed by strong evidence, with long-term reductions in substance use across diverse populations.”**

**“Real-world successes—from reduced truancy to student-led initiatives—demonstrate the power of prevention culture.”**

**“Prevention delivers long-term returns: better outcomes, stronger communities, and cost savings that make it a smart public investment.”**

Together, these messages show that prevention isn't just about stopping harm—it's about building a healthier, more engaged generation of students who are equipped to lead and thrive.

## Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools

### 6 Key Points

#### 5. Share clear, proven strategies to show prevention at work.

Highlighting the strategies already working in Vermont schools gives others a road map for action and helps build credibility, urgency, and buy-in. One size does not fit all, so different strategies or combinations of strategies work differently depending on a school, its community, and the specific issues the students may be confronting.

#### Examples of effective strategies:

##### Education & Awareness

Prevention starts with age-appropriate health education that engages the student in the discussion. Programs like [Getting to Y](#) turn information into action. Students analyze their own [Youth Risk Behavior Survey \(YRBS\)](#) data, identify areas of concern, and develop action plans for change. This builds not only health literacy, but also resilience, leadership, and stronger connections with peers and trusted adults.

##### Social & Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL builds essential skills like emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and decision-making—but its deeper value is in cultivating a sense of belonging. [A 2025 longitudinal study](#) found that students who felt connected to school at ages 15–16 were significantly less likely to use substances in young adulthood. Belonging is protective, and school culture matters.

##### Peer Support & Mentorship

Adolescents are shaped by their peers. Prevention strategies like peer mentoring, student leadership, and youth-led campaigns normalize healthy behaviors and build a culture of positive influence—student to student.

##### Parental & Community Engagement

The most successful prevention efforts don't stop at the school doors. Schools that actively engage families and local organizations help create a shared culture of prevention. [Getting to Y](#) supports this through community dialogue nights and student-led presentations to local decision-makers.

##### Early Identification & Intervention

Early support changes lives. Schools need systems that identify students at risk before substance use escalates—through SAPs, screening tools, and clear pathways to mental health services. Addressing the root causes of distress—trauma, academic stress, or unmet needs—prevents long-term harm.



## Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools

### 6 Key Points

#### Key Messages:

**“Strategies like Social & Emotional Learning, peer leadership, and early intervention don’t just reduce risk—they build belonging, confidence, and connection.”**

**“Student-led initiatives foster health literacy, leadership, and pride.”**

**“Prevention succeeds when families, schools, and communities work together.”**

**“Real strategies make prevention effective—and replicable—in any school.**

Together, these strategies show that prevention isn’t abstract. It’s practical, proven, and rooted in relationships that help students thrive.

## Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools

### 6 Key Points

#### 6. Show that everyone can play a role in prevention.

Even the strongest school-based prevention programs can't succeed in isolation. Prevention is most effective when it happens at every level—personal, social, organizational, community, and systems. [Vermont's Prevention Model](#) reinforces this: prevention thrives when it's supported across systems, not siloed within them.

You can help by making the case that prevention is a shared responsibility—and showing people exactly how to get involved. From families and educators to community leaders and policymakers, everyone has a role in shaping the environments where prevention can succeed.

Protecting the wellbeing of our students through substance misuse prevention benefits every member of our communities. And everyone can give their support. Families shape norms at home. Local leaders influence policy and funding. Organizations provide vital partnerships and expertise. Together, these layers make school-based prevention stronger, more visible, and more effective.

#### Actions to promote:

- **Talk to school boards or superintendents about adopting strong, research-backed prevention policies and practices.**
- **Share your voice in public forums or [submit letters](#) supporting funding and staffing for prevention work.**
- **Encourage schools to integrate prevention into all areas of learning—not just health class—so it becomes part of school culture.**
- **Promote partnerships between schools, healthcare providers, and community coalitions—and always uplift student voices. Programs like [Getting to Y](#) show the impact of youth engagement.**
- **[Connect](#) with a regional Prevention Consultant to help shape effective substance use prevention efforts in your community.**

Together, these actions reinforce the idea that prevention is a community-wide effort—one that grows stronger when everyone, at every level, steps in to support students, schools, and healthier futures.

## **Substance Misuse Prevention for Stronger Schools**

### **6 Key Points**

School-based prevention is more than curriculum—it's a community-wide investment in health, education, and opportunity. When people engage school boards, legislators, and families, they're not just helping prevent harm—they're helping build stronger schools for Vermont students and their communities.