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## Marijuana Legalization: how will this impact our schools?



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The official publication of



Canadian Association  
of Principals  
association canadienne des directeurs d'école

Publisher **TREVOR SHIRTLIFF**

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Printing **FRIESENS CORPORATION**  
**ONE PRINTERS WAY**  
**ALTONA, MANITOBA R0G 0B0**

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**CAP JOURNAL** is printed on FSC certified paper

**ARTICLE SUBMISSIONS** Submissions on topics related to school administration and educational leadership are encouraged. Guidelines and editorial calendar are available at: [www.cdnprincipals.com](http://www.cdnprincipals.com)

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Agreement #41622023

Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses  
to: **Circulation Department**  
177 McDermot Avenue, Suite 200  
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 0S1

**COVER IMAGES:** ©iStock/Dynamic Graphics



Winter 2019

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**Through Their Eyes:**  
Adult education students with special needs explore  
the world through digital photography

### Erratum:

In the Fall 2018 issue of CAP Journal, we wrongly published references within the Canada 2067 editorial feature. We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

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*Thomas Midbo*

President, Canadian Association of Principals

For most of us the school year is half over. Students are now at full energy levels. Us as school leaders are not only thinking about how to keep things running as smoothly as possible, but now it is time to start planning for next year.

Our 2019 CAP Winter Journal theme, “Marijuana Legalization: how will this impact our schools?” should spark your interest and provide opportunities for you to reflect on how this topic is being addressed for your local context. The articles presented should support your learning, and understanding of this important topic.

At this time, our CAP Executive and Board of Directors would like to thank the 2019 CAP organizing committee for planning our upcoming Annual CAP conference. The conference will be held in Whitehorse, Yukon on April 30-May 3, 2019! We look forward to seeing you there.

I would like to thank our CAP Executive, National Directors, and CAP members for giving me the opportunity to be the CAP President. It has been an honour and a privilege to serve you in this capacity with exceptional learning opportunities for me and our organization. Providing a national voice for school leaders across our great country brings a tremendous sense of pride for the work we do as educators in Canada. Keep up the great work for all who benefit in our education system. Looking forward to seeing you in Whitehorse!

Respectfully yours,

Thomas



## Editor's Comments



*Christina Pike*  
Editor, CAP Journal

Fellow Administrators,

As you begin reading this journal, the school year is in full swing, and we are well into not only a new school year but the new year. First reporting has been completed and plans for the upcoming school year are just beginning. As an administrator, it is important to recognize the need to wear many hats.

This journal's title is "Marijuana Legalization: how will this impact our schools?"

With the legalization of cannabis with the Cannabis Act effective October 17, 2018, there has been renewed debate on the impact this will have on the workplace as well as with our students. There has been a great deal of lead up to this date with each province responsible for their own regulations. This has renewed the discussion on drugs in general, and their impact on our schools. How are leaders expected to monitor and control illegal drug use? What are their responsibilities with regards to employees?

In spite of the excitement around the upcoming Holiday, there was no shortage of articles submitted across our country. Although our country's expanse is vast, our interests are similar. Given the popularity of the 'hot topics', a part of each journal will be dedicated to discuss some hot topics in Education.

I would like to once again thank all those that contributed to this edition of the CAP journal. It is fabulous to have a national perspective presented in this journal. I wish you all the best in this new year! Until our next journal!

Sincerely,

Christina



# *Legalization of Cannabis and The Canadian Association of Principals*

By: Kyran Dwyer



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*“On October 17, 2018, the Cannabis Act came into force, legalizing and strictly regulating access to cannabis for adults in Canada. The Government of Canada’s public health approach to cannabis better protects the health and safety of Canadians and keeps cannabis out of the hands of youth and profits out of the hands of criminals and organized crime.*

*Health Canada is developing regulations governing the production and sale of additional cannabis products, namely edible cannabis, cannabis extracts and cannabis topicals. Providing legal access to a broad range of cannabis products is a key element of the Government’s strategy to displace the illegal market over time. These cannabis products will be permitted for legal sale under the Cannabis Act no later than October 17, 2019.*

*The proposed regulations for edible cannabis, cannabis extracts and cannabis topicals announced today will be published in the Canada Gazette, Part I, on December 22, 2018 and are attached to this email along with the Regulatory Impact Analysis Statement. In order for us to hear from a diversity of Canadians and interested organizations about the proposals, stakeholders will be invited to share their views on the proposed regulations by visiting the <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/programs/consultation-strict-regulation-edible-cannabis-extracts-topicals.html> until February 20, 2019.*

*For more information please visit: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/news/2018/12/health-canada-launches-public-consultations-on-the-strict-regulation-of-additional-cannabis-products.html>”*

The above information was sent to me via email and I would like to share with you the Canadian Association of Principals’ (CAP) involvement with Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada in relation to Public Education and Awareness of Cannabis. As CAP president and now as past president, I have been part of a focus group with Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada. In November 2017, I attended a Partnership Symposium: Cannabis Public Education and Awareness. During the symposium, I took part in a panel discussion on Raising Awareness among Target Audiences. This provided CAP with an opportunity to have a Presence and be an Advocate and Communicate a message to Health Canada on cannabis legalization.

*Teachers have the responsibility to deliver curriculum and prepare youth to become productive citizens; it is extremely important for our youth to hear the same message related to cannabis from all trusted adults in their lives.*

During the panel discussion, I highlighted that not only educators had a responsibility to educate our youth on Cannabis, but also other mentors as well. Our youth interact with many others in mentoring roles including coaches, instructors, tutors, counsellors and other community leaders. Teachers have the responsibility to deliver curriculum and prepare youth to become productive citizens, it is extremely important for our youth to hear the same message related to cannabis from all trusted adults in their lives. As well, there are many organizations in our country who are more than willing to be partners with schools to share a message to our youth on public education and awareness of cannabis. The focus on fear mongering to youth as a deterrent for Cannabis use does not work. A more proactive approach is necessary. I highlighted the need to focus on youth resiliency and social emotional learning as a method of empowering our youth to be aware, engaged and responsible decision makers.

Due to my attendance at the Symposium on behalf of CAP and stressing the need for engaged and informed youth, our

organization was invited to be part of a Youth Resiliency Project Steering Committee led by Dr. Claire Crooks out of Western University. (Dr. Crooks has an article in this CAP Journal on the project)

In November 2018, CAP was invited to a School Stakeholder Forum by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) and the Chief Public Health Officer (CPHO) of Canada, Dr. Theresa Tam. This one-day forum was on the role of healthy school communities in the prevention of problematic substance use. I represented CAP at this Forum. The forum entitled Fostering Collaborations to Build Healthier School Communities and Prevent Problematic Substance Use among Canadian Youth was convened by the CPHO.

The focus of the forum included: i) to convene diverse school stakeholders (students, educators, youth health organizations, researchers, etc.) from across Canada to discuss challenges and opportunities to bolster healthy school communities and help prevent and minimize the harms associated with problematic

substance use among youth; and, ii) to facilitate collaborative coordinated efforts to achieve these objectives.

The School Stakeholder panel on the topic of Leveraging Strengths and Capacities to Prevent Problematic Substance Use: Experiences On The Ground led to discussions on how organizations can help build capacity for collaboration related to student and school health. We held small group discussions where we looked at key challenges facing students in Canada today followed by a focused discussion on Opportunities for Collaborative Action. Some of the topics discussed were mental health, healthy relationships, social inclusion, caregiver views and other relevant topics.

The discussions were very informative and engaging. For me, listening to the voice of the youth involved was motivating and interesting. There were several key points that I have been able to realize from my involvement over the past year with regards to the legalization of cannabis. First and foremost, the voice of our youth must be heard and listened to in any discussion on legalization of cannabis. Secondly, the discussion and focus must be on harm reduction and not on scare tactics on the harmful effects of usage. Thirdly, all discussion must be evidence based with a strong focus on research. Research shows “Initiating cannabis use at a young age – primarily before the age of 16 – and frequent use of cannabis can increase the risk for substance use disorder and psychosis (The Chief Public Health Officer’s Report 2019). Lastly, there are many organizations with a wealth of pertinent information, ready to use manuals and literature. The personnel is very knowledgeable, ready and willing to help share whatever they have with schools, students, caregivers and the general public. ■

#### AUTHOR BIO

**Kyran Dwyer** is a principal in St. John’s NL. He is a past president on the Canadian Association of Principals (2017-18).





# Recreational Cannabis is Legal: Are you prepared?

By: Linda Millar



**“Early and frequent cannabis use is linked with reduced IQ, lower school performance and increased risk of dropping out.”**

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Although the Canadian government has changed recreational cannabis use laws, it is presently illegal to use for anyone under the age of 19 everywhere except Quebec and Alberta, where the age will be 18, (Subject to change). Therefore, in theory very few of your students will be affected by this new legislation. However, like alcohol, we know that some students will use cannabis before the legal age.

We are facing a significant change in the way recreational cannabis will be obtained and consumed and that may bring with it some changes in the way our schools address drug education in the future.


## Some facts about youth and cannabis:

- Cannabis is often the first drug kids are offered.<sup>1</sup>
- Canadian youth are the top users of marijuana in the developed world according to a 2013 UNICEF Office of Research report.
- The rate of Cannabis use is two times higher among Canadian youth aged 15 – 24 than it is for adults.<sup>2</sup>
- The pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain that controls reasoning and impulses, does not mature fully until around the age of 25 years.<sup>3</sup>
- Cannabis use affects the part of the brain that is responsible for memory, decision- making and executive function.<sup>4</sup>
- Cannabis, like any other drug can lead to dependence or addiction. It affects the brain's reward system in the same way as other addictive drugs. The likelihood of developing problem use or addiction increases considerably for those who start young.<sup>5</sup>
- Over one third (37%) of teens feel that driving high (after marijuana use) is not as risky as drunk driving, while one in four high school seniors say they have ridden in a car with a high driver.<sup>6</sup>
- Four out of ten fatally injured drivers who had used cannabis prior to the crash were between 16 and 24 years of age.<sup>7</sup>

## What are young people's views about cannabis use?

Health Canada's 2017 Canadian Cannabis survey, gives us some insight into what Canadians aged 16 and older believe about cannabis use. Here are some relevant highlights:

- 28% of respondents considered smoking cannabis occasionally for non-medical purposes is completely socially acceptable, compared to 19% for using tobacco (including cigarettes, cigars or snuff) and 56% for consuming alcohol.
- 64% of respondents who reported using cannabis in the past 12 months think cannabis could be habit forming, compared to 80% for non-users.
- 9% of respondents who reported using cannabis in the past 12 months drove within 2 hours of consumption in their lifetime. Of those respondents, 15% consumed cannabis and alcohol; and 8% consumed cannabis and another drug.<sup>8</sup>
- Students in grades 7 to 12 were asked how difficult they thought it would be to get cannabis if they wanted it and 41% (approximately 870,000) of students reported that they thought it would be "fairly easy" or "very easy" to obtain.<sup>9</sup>



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## How will this new legislation impact my school?

Time will tell, but at the very least, there will be many cannabis related questions from staff, parents and students. Let's take a look at some of the questions your staff may be asking.

### **Staff may ask:**

*Will I be provided with the information I need in order to answer questions honestly while maintaining the integrity of our school and my own personal integrity?*

- What resources do you and your staff have in place to address substance use and misuse?
- Do they need to be updated?
- Are they relevant to your school and your students?

A really helpful resource from Drug Free Kids Canada, called "Cannabis Talk Kit- Know how to talk with your teen" can be found at [www.drugfreekidscanada.org/](http://www.drugfreekidscanada.org/)

Although this kit was designed with parents and caregivers in mind, The Cannabis Talk Kit is a resource that can also provide you as an administrator and/or educator with evidence based information about cannabis. Along with some effective and practical tools, this kit can help you and your staff set the stage for balanced and productive discussions with young people about cannabis and substance use.

Here's a sample of what you can find in the Cannabis Talk Kit:

- The facts about Cannabis and youth
- Short and long term effects of cannabis use.
- Cannabis and the developing teenage brain
- Cannabis and driving – Many young drivers get behind the wheel after smoking pot.
- Practical tips and tools for how to address the use of cannabis and other drugs with your kids
- Sample questions that may arise and expert advice on how to answer them

You can download the Cannabis Talk Kit online.<sup>10</sup> Drug Free Kids Canada has several other resources available that administrators and educators may find valuable, including the DFK Drug Guide for Parents.<sup>11</sup>

## Are there any legal implications connected to in-class discussions and disclosures that might arise?

You will already be familiar with your School Board's policies on classroom disclosures but you might want to verify if anything has been updated recently that can answer this question.

- Can you suspend a student for smelling like cannabis?
- Should staff members divulge current or past use of cannabis when talking to their students?
- As a staff member, are there any rules about personal use outside of the school setting?

Clearly, parents, teachers, social workers, psychologists, guidance counsellors and police will have to deal with these questions now that recreational cannabis is legal.

## What grade should discussions about cannabis begin?

At Drug Free Kids Canada, we believe parents and the adults in children's lives can play a major part in preventing early drug use. As the administrator for your school, you have the opportunity to set the stage for your staff to reach young students in the classroom with balanced information and open dialogue before they make the choice to use cannabis and other drugs. We at DFK feel that, given this information at an early age, students will have the tools they need to make smart, informed choices about cannabis and other drugs. That said, we realize that some youth may begin using at an early age and if so, we understand the need to engage these young people in effective harm reduction strategies.

Most school boards in Canada introduce classroom discussions and activities related to drugs at the grade six level. Generally, while learning about cannabis is specifically addressed in Grade 6, student learning about substance use, abuse and misuse is part of a continuum of learning that extends from Grades 1 to 12. See: Cannabis Information for Educators, Summer, 2018.<sup>12</sup>

Found in most cases under the Physical and Health strand in the curriculum, these lessons may need to be tweaked to include the latest information about cannabis use and misuse, prevention and harm reduction and the key message of delaying first use while the adolescent brain continues to develop. Discussions about medical cannabis, edible cannabis product (which will not be legal for sale until Fall of 2019), driving in a car with someone under the influence, dependence and health risks are just a few of the necessary elements to be included in new curricula.

### How can I address yet another topic in an already overcrowded curriculum?

This question will be very familiar to you as administrators. As always, it is important for educators to feel that they are addressing all of the necessary curriculum objectives. Cannabis education, as mentioned above, already fits into the Health and Physical Education strand but perhaps it can also be integrated across the curriculum in other areas such as the Arts, Language, Math and Social Studies, Social Sciences and Humanities and Canadian and World Studies – Law.

- Guidance counsellors will also be busy! This will definitely be a team effort.
- Check with your local Ministry for new curriculum ideas and suggestions.
- The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and Addiction provides a helpful on-line learning module resource for staff that teach adolescents<sup>13</sup>
- Addressing these and other pertinent questions from your staff is just the beginning.

As educators in the 21st century, we manage change well. This will be another co-learning experience. Don't be afraid to ask for help. As the leader of your school, you set the tone and create the collaborative environment for learning with your staff, parents and community. You've got this! ■

#### AUTHOR BIO

**Linda Millar** is a contributor to Drug Free Kids Canada, and an education consultant with over 40 years of experience. She has authored several teacher resources in the fields of substance use prevention, media literacy, childhood obesity, and mental health.

#### References

<sup>1</sup> CCSA 2015 The Effects of Cannabis Use on Adolescence

<sup>2</sup> (CTADS 2015)

<sup>3</sup> (George and Vaccarino 2015)

<sup>4</sup> CCSA 2015 The Effects of Cannabis Use on Adolescence

<sup>5</sup> Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 2008

<sup>6</sup> DFK Attitudinal Tracking Survey 2017

<sup>7</sup> Beirness, D.J., Beasley, E.E., & Boase, P. (2013). Drug use among fatally injured drivers in Canada. In B. Watson & M. Sheehan (Eds.), Proceedings of the International Conference on Alcohol, Drugs 26

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Cannabis Survey, December 19, 2017 - Ottawa, ON - Government of Canada

<sup>9</sup> 2014-15 Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.drugfreekidscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Cannabis-Talk-Kit\\_EN.pdf](https://www.drugfreekidscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Cannabis-Talk-Kit_EN.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.drugfreekidscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/kids-enfants-enf-kid-eng.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/healthyschools/cannabis-fact-sheet-en.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.ccdus.ca/module/cannabis-adolescence-EN/story\\_html5.html](http://www.ccdus.ca/module/cannabis-adolescence-EN/story_html5.html)



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# Concentus Citizenship Education

*Enabling today's youth to be the responsible citizens of tomorrow.*

By: David Arnot



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*On November 10th it was my privilege to meet with the executive of the Canadian Association of Principals to let them know a revolution had begun. My presentation that day was essentially an invitation to join me in that revolution. I extend this invitation to you.*

Our world continually reveals itself to be more diverse, more complex, and for many, more uncertain... this is happening at an unprecedented pace. It's happening technologically, culturally, socially and politically. This accelerated change requires a corresponding revolution, not evolution, in our goals for education.

We are blessed to be Canadian citizens. Canadians live in peace, prosperity, and relative harmony. We have unfettered freedom and strong institutions of governance and education. We live in a nation that integrates newcomers not by force, but through generosity and benevolence. Ours is a country in which multiculturalism is a solution, not a problem. At the same time, there is a fragility attached to these observations. A fragility that is directly related to the support, knowledge, and understanding all Canadians have for our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-theistic country.

The leaders of Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden have all said in the last five years that multi-culturalism has failed in their countries with damaging consequences. Right-wing populists gained votes and parliamentary seats in France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria in the last year. Beyond multi-culturalism, democracy itself is in a global crisis the likes of which have not been seen since the great depression. The American bi-partisan think tank "Freedom House" has monitored the status of freedom and democracy around the world since the 1940s. In its "Freedom in the World 2018 Report" it declares: "democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades in 2017 as its basic tenets—including guarantees of free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of the press, and the rule of law—came under attack around the world." This is supported by the World Bank's "Worldwide Governance Indicators". The number of democratic countries in the world peaked in 2005 and has since been continuously in steady decline. And yet I have hope.

I have faith that we will preserve our multi-culturalism and protect our democracy. In order to do that, we need to act, and that action is to educate. To paraphrase H.G. Wells: "Democracy is a race between education and chaos". Education must win.

Democracy is premised on an informed citizenry. This explains why a Human Rights Commissioner is so concerned with education: it is the most powerful protection for democracy and pluralism. Education is the antidote to intolerance, ignorance, hatred, and democratic indifference.

The Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, and all human rights commissions, owe their existence to the world's response to the holocaust which is contained in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was the foundation for the "Rights Revolution" that witnessed human rights move to the forefront of national and international consciousness. The Rights Revolution occurred in the last half of the 20th century. In the first half of the 21st century there is a new revolution underway: the "Responsibility Revolution". I invite all educators to be part of this new revolution because rights without the corresponding responsibilities have little substance.

The rights revolution was created by lawyers in court rooms. The responsibility revolution will be created by teachers in classrooms.

Educators are agents of change. They breathe life into the past, reveal the present, and shape the future. Educators inspire hope and change. Educators, with strong resources, will enable the youth of today to become the responsible citizens of tomorrow.

Having described democratic decline around the world, let me describe to you our response. We are addressing the overdue need to intentionally, explicitly, purposefully, and methodically educate Canadian students on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, at every stage of their education.

Using Saskatchewan as a model, the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission has created adaptable Kindergarten to Grade 12 Canadian citizenship education resources. Began in 2008, the project it is now a stand-alone organization with registered charity status we have named *Concentus*.

The Concentus Citizenship Education resources are intended to foster:

- Engaged citizens who critically examine, question, advocate, and defend rights and responsibilities embedded in democracy
- Lifelong learning citizens who strive to understand the dynamics of change in our society
- Citizens who critically seek the information and understandings needed to make reasoned and unbiased decisions
- Citizens with a strong sense of self, community, and place who value and demonstrate a positive commitment to those relationships at local, provincial, national, and global levels

These teaching and learning resources took eight years to create and were built in partnership with the ministries of education and justice, universities, teachers federations, school board associations, first nations education authorities and many others. Truly a collaborative effort.

The result provides the means to produce a student that embodies the five essential citizenship competencies:

- **Enlightenment:** acknowledgement that historical events create context for, and have an impact on today's society
- **Empowerment:** understanding of our rights and the accompanying responsibilities
- **Engagement:** critical thinking and active participation that contributes to a civil society
- **Empathy:** understanding, respect, and affirmation of individual, social, and cultural diversity
- **Ethical behavior:** decision making that respects the rights of others and promotes societal well-being amidst differing concepts of the public good

Social sciences are the "on ramp" for Concentus citizenship education. There are cross-curricular opportunities and alignments with a range of other classroom subjects (numeracy, literacy, p.e.). By aligning with existing curricular outcomes and indicators, Concentus is not adding to a teacher's duties, but assisting them in what is already required

Concentus resources help students, teachers, and schools with vetted, trustworthy, timely classroom-ready resources that address current curriculum, and also allow secure exploration of difficult and delicate topics such as: racism and bigotry, mental health and addictions, disability, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, and indigenous culture and reconciliation.

Teaching approach is as important to effective citizenship education as the content. Inquiry-based teaching and learning is a vital aspect of effective citizenship education and use of the Concentus resources. Students construct knowledge and deep understanding of citizenship and the accompanying issues. They take ownership and responsibility for their discoveries. Developing the knowledge, competencies and skills for the teaching of citizenship education requires a direct, intentional, and sustained process of professional development and school engagement: P.D. for teachers along with a reliable support system of fellow teachers and administrators. Informed by doctoral studies in effective education P.D., our process and partnerships are demonstrating proof-of-concept.

Introducing citizenship education that supports a culture-shift in the classroom requires a collaborative, systemic, division-level approach. We recognize that the resources and approach must be able to adapt to the unique needs and context of the jurisdiction at every level: division, school, classroom.

Our goal is to be in every grade, in every school in Canada. Saskatchewan is our pilot location... our proving grounds. Our success to date has been demonstrable. ■

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I urge each of you to explore the site and its resources at [www.concentus.ca](http://www.concentus.ca).

This is my invitation to you to join the "Responsibility Revolution" and support citizenship education. This revolution gives me hope for our country. You, as educators are the wellspring of that hope.

### AUTHOR BIO

**David Arnot** is the Board Chair of Concentus Citizenship Education Foundation. David has served a range of secondments throughout his career as a Provincial Court Judge: as Director General of Aboriginal Justice, as Treaty Commissioner for the Province of Saskatchewan, and currently as Chief Commissioner of the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission.



# *Preventing Problematic Substance Use Through Positive Youth Development*

By: Courtney Cadieux, Katelyn Godin, Alicia Lapointe and Claire Crooks



School administrators and educators have long had concerns about their students' substance use. The recent legalization of non-medical cannabis, ongoing opioid crisis, and growing attention to the costly social and health harms associated with alcohol use have intensified discussions within the education system on the role of schools in addressing problematic substance use.<sup>1</sup> Since youth are at a greater risk of experiencing certain social and health consequences associated with problematic substance use, school administrators, educators and other members of school communities have a vested interest in supporting students through school-based prevention efforts.

Traditional approaches to achieving this goal have centred on increasing youths' understanding of the health risks associated with substance use. While having open, nonjudgmental conversations about substance use and sharing balanced, evidence-based information on its potential risks are critically important, there is evidence that these efforts are largely ineffective in isolation.<sup>1</sup> 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. Interventions focused solely on communicating risks do not reflect this complexity or the diversity of youths' experiences.

School-based efforts to enhance youths' well-being and promote positive youth development 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. There is a growing awareness of how healthy school communities that support positive youth development can also have a major protective influence against problematic substance use, poor mental health, bullying and violence.

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

### Promoting well-being

There are many known protective factors that increase youths' overall health and well-being and counterbalance risk factors that can lead to problematic substance use.<sup>ii</sup> Key protective factors that are critical to positive youth development include: stable and caring relationships with adults; a sense of belonging and social support;<sup>v</sup> self-efficacy, strong communication and decision-making skills;<sup>v</sup> engaging in positive social behaviours;<sup>v</sup> a healthy lifestyle;<sup>iii</sup> a high degree of school engagement;<sup>v</sup> and a sense of faith, hope, and cultural identity.<sup>iv</sup>

School administrators, educators and others within the school community can bolster these protective factors by:

- Building authentic, positive relationships with youth;
- Providing opportunities for youth to engage in positive social behaviours (e.g., sharing, helping, volunteering, etc.);
- Acknowledging their achievements and acts of kindness (no matter how small);
- Providing diverse opportunities for students to develop their physical and emotional skills; and,
- Encouraging students' sense of hope.

Through these efforts, students are supported to develop healthy relationships with others, discover their strengths, and effectively manage the challenges and stress in their lives, which, in turn, lowers their risk of problematic substance use.

### Creating welcoming environments

Student well-being is enhanced when school staff cultivate positive social and learning environments. Positive school communities are places where youth are included, connected, supported, accepted, and represented. Administrators can foster positive school communities by applying a whole-school model that incorporates well-being as a vital aspect of student success (see Comprehensive School Health Framework, 2018).<sup>v</sup> A whole-school, comprehensive approach recognizes the importance of reinforcing messages and actions that promote health and well-being through numerous channels. It also acknowledges the well-established link between health and learning outcomes (Comprehensive School health Framework, 2018).<sup>v</sup>

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

1. Adopting policies that discourage negative behaviours and actions (e.g., bullying, discrimination, etc.) and facilitate appropriate support for students' struggling with poor mental health, problematic substance use and other challenges;
2. Working closely with other adults within the school community, students, families and community organizations to create and/or strengthen partnerships and services that reflect and respond to the school community's diversity and needs;
3. Creating a positive social and physical environment in the school by funding, promoting and participating in regular, inclusive community-building school events and activities (e.g., diverse interest groups and recreation activities, gay-straight alliances, etc.) that facilitate relationship building between students, and between students and adults in the school community; and,
4. Supporting school staff to adopt teaching and learning practices that are culturally-responsive and enhance social-emotional learning. School administrators are encouraged to consider these approaches when seeking learning opportunities for staff and coaching and supporting staff through annual learning plans and formal performance appraisals.

### Effective programming

There are evidence-based positive youth development programs that align with existing curricula expectations versus adding on to school staffs' existing responsibilities. Effective programs address topics such as healthy relationships, resisting peer pressure, communication skills, self-awareness, and empathy. Program activities are typically interactive in nature, incorporate engaging and relevant material, allow for personal reflection, and encourage peer-to-peer sharing. Conversely, initiatives that rely on one-time events, scared straight tactics or "just say no" messaging are largely ineffective, and in some cases, even increase the likelihood of problematic substance use.<sup>vii</sup> Administrators can support positive youth development in their schools by encouraging school staff to implement evidence-based practices and by providing resources for carrying these out in the classroom.

The Fourth R (Relationships) and the Fourth R Healthy Relationships Plus (HRP) programs were developed for Canadian school systems and have shown promising results in promoting social-emotional skills and reducing violence and related risk behaviours. (see [www.youthrelationships.org](http://www.youthrelationships.org)).<sup>8</sup> All Fourth R programs are based on the contention that relationship skills can be taught the same way as other academic or athletic skills. There are different Fourth R curricula to match different grade levels and education systems. The Fourth R has also developed specific programming for LGBTQ2+ youth and Indigenous youth because these populations have unique protective factors that can be bolstered by emphasizing identity and connectedness, but are also at higher risk for experiencing negative outcomes, such as problematic substance use.<sup>vii, viii</sup>

As leaders within school communities, administrators play a critical role in preventing problematic substance use among their students by promoting positive youth development through comprehensive school approaches.



All youth have the capacity for wellbeing and resilience, even in the context of academic, social, or health challenges. Administrators that recognize this potential and are committed to leveraging these capacities through

supportive environments and relationships are critical for fostering positive school communities and equipping students with the resources they need to support their healthy development, both today and tomorrow. ■

<sup>i</sup> Problematic substance use is defined as the use of any psychoactive substance in a circumstance, amount, frequency or method that is harmful or potentially harmful to an individual and/or others.



For further information on this topic, check out our teacher and administrator series, preventing problematic substance use through Positive Youth Development, which can be found at: [csmh.uwo.ca/positive-youth-development.html](http://csmh.uwo.ca/positive-youth-development.html)

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# Building on Strengths and Working Together:

## *Comprehensive approaches to preventing problematic substance among youth*

By Theresa Tam



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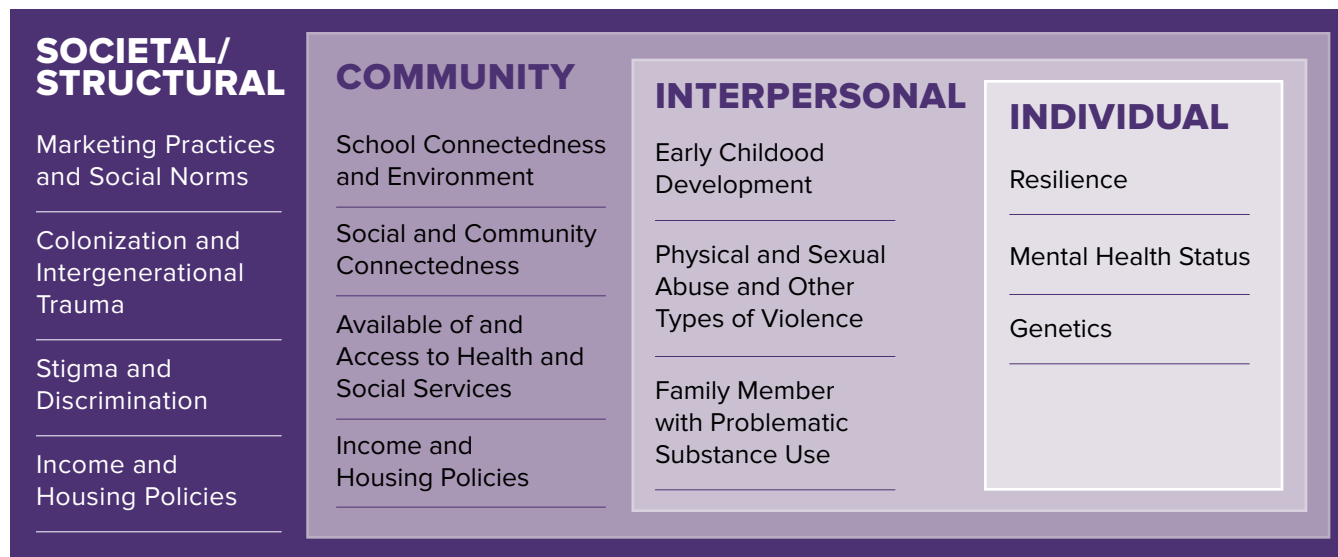
Now is a critical time for Canadians to reflect on how we can collectively address problematic substance use among youth across the country.<sup>1</sup> This is one of the reasons my report on the the state of public health in Canada last year focused on this issue.<sup>vii</sup>

With the growing epidemic of opioids deaths across the country, the recent legalization of non-medical cannabis, and the wide range of health and social harms of alcohol, there is a growing need to examine and identify the role of schools in promoting positive mental health<sup>2</sup> and preventing problematic substance use among youth.

There is no single cause of problematic substance use (Figure 1).<sup>i</sup> Schools are uniquely positioned to contribute to prevention efforts by addressing multiple and interacting protective and risk factors. School-based programs are unparalleled in terms of their ability to reach large numbers of youth at a critical period in their lives when lifelong behaviours often become established. The earlier one starts using substances, the more heavy or frequent the use, the higher the risk of problematic substance use.<sup>i</sup> Factors such as academic performance, engagement in school life, and a connection to school where students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported by others protect against problematic substance use.<sup>i</sup> In addition, certain types of school-based programs have been shown to facilitate positive mental health by going beyond addressing risks to building resilience.<sup>i</sup>

Research shows that school-based substance use prevention programs that take an abstinence approach are ineffective and can potentially be counterproductive.<sup>v</sup> For example, several studies have shown that Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) programs may actually increase substance use among students by alienating them, which can undermine the important protective influence of school connectedness.<sup>v</sup> On the other hand, school-based programs have been proven to be effective when they employ comprehensive, strengths-based approaches that enhance resilience and protective factors among youth and are rooted in local context.<sup>i</sup> Some of the characteristics that make these programs effective are described below.

*Figure 1: Risk and protective factors associated with problematic substance use in youth<sup>i</sup>*



## How to build effective, school-based, substance use prevention programs.<sup>i</sup>

### 1. Adopt a strengths-based perspective to building skills and resilience among youth and their families

Purely knowledge-based programs do not lead to significant changes in youth behaviour. Programs that teach youth to resist risky behaviours and enhance resilience show more promise when combined with elements that aim to build resilience through life skills training (i.e. communication and social skills) and cognitive competencies (i.e. goal orientation, stress management). Combining these programs with parent- and family-oriented programs can lead to even greater benefits for youth by building caregiver skills and resilience.

### 2. Integrate principles of self-determination and cultural safety

For Indigenous youth, school-based programs have to acknowledge the impact historical and intergenerational trauma, including colonization, loss of traditional culture and language, and experiences with residential schools, have had on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis families and communities across the country. This involves acknowledging that school-based programs for Indigenous youth need to be founded on holistic approaches to healing and wellness that are based on the strengths and resilience of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples (i.e. cultural values and teachings that place importance on Indigenous languages, traditions and culturally specific knowledge on resiliency, risk, and protective factors).

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### 3. Address the key role of social norms

A key element of successful prevention programs is that they address social norms. Perceptions of what is deemed “normal use” can influence youth use of substances, as well as the availability, marketing, and the price of substances. For example, because of its social acceptance, risky drinking is high among Canadian youth.<sup>v,i</sup> Cannabis use is already relatively common among Canadian youth, and nicotine vaping among teens is increasing.<sup>v,vi</sup>

In light of recent legalisation of non-medical cannabis, we want to make sure that cannabis does not become the new alcohol and that young people can make informed decisions about use. The *Lower-risk Cannabis Use Guidelines*<sup>iii</sup> can offer such guidance by informing educators and youth of the harmful consequences of use and by promoting safer use. However, we know that interventions that only target knowledge and awareness of the dangers of substance use do not change youth behaviour. There is promising evidence that shows that school-based programs that combine social competence and social influence can prevent cannabis use among youth.<sup>iv</sup>

### 4. Ensure that programs are age and developmentally appropriate

Prevention interventions are most effective when delivered prior to when substance use begins or at the very early stages. As such, prevention programming can be implemented at all grade levels, particularly at ages that represent key transition points when youth generally begin to use substances. This means that school-based programs may be most effective if implemented during the middle-school years when experimentation with substance use is most likely to occur

### 5. Foster inclusion and eliminate stigma and discrimination

There is ample evidence showing that youth who experience stigma or discrimination are at heightened risk for problematic substance use. This includes youth who experience stigma and/or discrimination based on their race/ethnicity, Indigenous identity, mental health status, disability, and/or LGBTQ2 status.

Schools can help to eliminate stigma and discrimination by adopting equitable and compassionate policies, practices, and language. This includes making sure that educators can help to create and foster a safe, supportive, and non-judgemental environments where students can feel comfortable having discussions about substance use. It also means creating inclusive and supportive spaces that embrace diversity by adopting policies that discourage discrimination and bullying and by investing in safe spaces (i.e. alliances for LGBTQ2 youth or youth of colour).

### 6. Be interactive and youth-led


A wide body of research suggests that to be effective, programs need to consult youth to inform, design, implementation and evaluation. Interactions between teachers and students (and among peers) that stress communication and balanced discussions about substance use can improve prevention programs. Student feedback can be routinely sought and used to inform ongoing and future interventions.


(See the 2018 CPHO report for detailed examples)

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## Summary

Why some young people use substances and some of them experience problems is complex. Many underlying and interconnected factors drive harmful use like physical and sexual abuse, family conflict, lack of stable housing and stigma and discrimination. On the other hand, protective factors such as school connections, positive relationships with friends and family and community safety can increase a youth's ability to cope with adversity and prevent him or her to use substances in a harmful manner.

In November 2018, at a school stakeholder forum, I had the opportunity to hear youth, educators, community-based youth organizations, mental health professionals, and research experts identify enhanced ways we can work together to support students in school settings to face the challenges associated with substance use. I look forward to continued collaboration across sectors to enhance school and community environments to support youth to feel included and connected, buffering against the risk of problematic substance use. ■

<sup>i</sup> Problematic substance use refers to the use of a psychoactive substance in a manner, situation, amount, or frequency that can cause harm to the person using the substance or those around them.

<sup>ii</sup> Positive mental health is the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face.

<sup>iii</sup> This refers to consuming 5 or more drinks on a single occasion.

### AUTHOR BIO

**Dr. Theresa Tamis** is Canada's Chief Public Health Officer. She is a physician with expertise in immunization, infectious disease, emergency preparedness and global health security. Last year she released a report on preventing problematic substance use among youth.<sup>vii</sup>

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# Principal Support of Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action: The Importance of Relationality and Reciprocity

By: Pamela Osmond-Johnson and Peter Turner



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Documenting the travesties of the Indian Residential School system, the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Final Report (2015a) and the concluding Calls to Action (2015b) in 2015 signifies an opportunity for an important turning point in Canadian education. The TRC also paints a encouraging picture of the importance of current school systems in supporting a more equitable and peaceful Canada, where the cultures and rights of Indigenous peoples are respected and upheld. Indeed, as Chief Commissioner Murray Sinclair has often declared, "education has gotten us into this mess, and education will get us out."

But how will schools go about responding and fulfilling this commitment? Arguably, curriculum policy, ongoing professional learning, and the hiring and retention of more Indigenous educators are critical areas that need addressing. Work from Fullan (2014) and others (Deal & Peterson, 2016), however, also point to the significant impact school principals have on shaping school culture and fostering educational change. Given the current under-representation of Indigenous principals in Canada's K-12 education sector (which is problematic in its own right), it is non-Indigenous principals who have largely been tasked with engaging with the Calls to Action and supporting their implementation in their schools and classrooms. As Tuck and Yang (2012) note, however, "There is a long and bumbled history of non-Indigenous peoples making moves to alleviate the impacts of colonization" (p. 3). Indeed, Indigenous peoples have a lengthy track record of experiences with settler 'good intentions', which have often served to further perpetuate their marginalization. How then might non-Indigenous school leaders go about engaging with Calls to Action in ethical and authentic ways? Recognizing this complexity, Battiste (2013) proposes what she calls Indigenist agendas, a movement which enables the supportive effort of non-Indigenous activism, while acknowledging the space of Indigenous Peoples. Accordingly, all school principals—irrespective of their cultural heritage and in the spirit of reconciliation—can embrace Indigenous allyship through deepening their relationships (with Indigenous people, with the land, etc) and attending to the accountability of these relationships.

**All school principals—irrespective of their cultural heritage and in the spirit of reconciliation—can embrace Indigenous allyship through deepening their relationships (with Indigenous people, with the land, etc) and attending to the accountability of these relationships.**

That being said, it is imperative that non-Indigenous school leaders develop an understanding of and orientation towards authentic allyship, rather than adopting so called “White saviour” stances. While non-Indigenous school leaders might play important roles in supporting the implementation of Calls to Action, forging ahead with their own agendas simply reinforces the imposition of colonialism (Bishop, 2015). They must first challenge traditional hierarchies and constructions of authority to honour the agency and voices of the Indigenous communities they serve. It is also important to note that allyship is not something one ‘becomes’; it is action oriented, something one does (Bishop, 2015). Moreover, the title of ally cannot be bestowed upon oneself.

As Smith, Puckett, & Simon (2016) note: *Allyship is something that is designated by a person or community that one is aspiring to ally themselves with, because it is only possible for Indigenous Peoples to truly evaluate and ascertain the degree to which they think a non-Indigenous person is being their ally. Therefore, Indigenous Peoples are the only ones that can deem a non-Indigenous person an ally* (p. 6).

It is this understanding of the importance of school leaders in working towards authentic settler allyship that underpinned a recent study on the efforts of school principals in Saskatchewan.

Conducted in 2018 with five non-Indigenous school leaders (3 principals and 2 vice-principals), the study illustrates

that attention and care must be paid to the intricacies of settler/Indigenous relations. Colonial barriers must be dismantled and new patterns of interaction created through reciprocity, partnership, and cross-cultural cooperation. This requires re-positioning oneself not as the leader of the school’s reconciliation efforts, but as partners with Indigenous peoples in that process. According to Ryan (2016), school leaders must be strategic and intentional in how they go about engaging in advocacy work. Findings in this study, however, illustrate that reconciliation work needs to be grounded within the Indigenous principal of relationality (Kovach, 2005). Here, strategic advocacy is understood as being predicated on authentic relationships with Indigenous peoples. In particular, the principals in our study were attempting to



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thoughtfully position themselves, not as experts in Indigenous education, but as catalysts for supporting and acknowledging the Indigenous expertise in the communities they served. Those that had been engaged in social justice work for some time had developed strong relationships with the Indigenous community; engaging Elders and creating welcoming school spaces that honour and emphasize traditional forms of knowledge. Those who were earlier in their careers recognized the importance of such relationships and were attempting to engage but to varying degrees of success. This was particularly the case for two participants who noted that their networks and community connections were not well developed and, unlike some of their urban counterparts, there was little in the way of system-level support to assist in making those contacts.

Understanding the colonial underpinnings of their own organizations and the power structures within was also particularly important. More experienced leaders tended to have more nuanced understandings of the inner workings of their division and were better able to use those dynamics to advance reconciliation efforts by knowing who their own allies were and, at the same time, anticipating the kinds of road blocks that might present themselves. Knowledge of provincial level priorities around Indigenous student success, graduate rates, and student engagement also aided astute school leaders in carving out safe spaces for reconciliation work amidst what was perceived by other participants as competing priorities. Developing an understanding and appreciation of the diverse cultural and political intricacies of their Indigenous community partners was equally important. This was accomplished in a variety of ways including working with Elders, parents, and community members on cultural events and ongoing initiatives that extended beyond curricular infusion, like drumming and dance groups. Those in school divisions that had Indigenous consultants also spoke highly of the value of those supports in helping navigate organizational complexities and building relationships with the Indigenous community.

Overall, the findings suggest that strategic advocacy work around reconciliation must center around respect for Indigenous



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agency and reciprocity with Indigenous partners. There was a personal investment on the part of all five school leaders to be humble and vulnerable in accepting their knowledge gaps while trusting and honouring the knowledge of others. Experienced social justice-oriented leaders were both tenacious and strategic in their actions, utilizing strategies that were particular to their given levels of experience and the institutional context within which they worked. Newer school leaders spoke of beginning to embody this kind of orientation to allyship but were less secure in their actions.

Undoubtedly, this is complex and complicated work. Yet, if TRC Calls to Action are to secure a stronghold in Canadian schools and effect transformative societal improvements, it is imperative that school leaders be ready and willing to take up Indigenist agendas—regardless of their own ancestry or heritage. While such actions address only one small fragment of the redistribution of power and privilege required, reframing traditional hierarchies and colonial constructions of authority and leadership in schools is a good place to begin with respect to ingraining and sustaining Calls to Action as integral



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parts of Canadian education. While these preliminary understandings constitute the beginning of better understandings around the role of non-Indigenous school leaders in the reconciliation process and the supports needed to aid them, there is much more to be learned. Supported by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), plans for extending this research to Manitoba and Alberta are currently underway with the hope of gaining additional insights into the manner in which school leaders in different provincial contexts are attempting to engage in reconciliation work in schools.

*Do you know a school leader in Manitoba, Saskatchewan or Alberta who is engaging with Indigenous communities and supporting TRC Calls to Action? If you or someone you know are interested in participating in the second phase of this study, please contact project lead, Dr. Pamela Osmond-Johnson for more information [pamela.osmond-johnson@uregina.ca](mailto:pamela.osmond-johnson@uregina.ca)*

**Acknowledgements:** Many thanks to our Cultural Advisor, Elder Betty McKenna for vetting this article. We are honoured and humbled to work with such a generous and wise leader. ■



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A former science teacher and school administrator from Newfoundland and Labrador, **Pamela Osmond-Johnson** is currently an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Regina, which is located on Treaty 4 and Treaty 6 territory.

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# What You Need to Know About Cannabis Use and the Developing Brain

By: Chris Summerville



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With the federal government legalization of cannabis on October 17, 2018, many medical associations, mental health organizations, community groups, law enforcement agencies and educational bodies have expressed grave and deep concerns about what the public does not know about cannabis and the very paramount importance of safeguarding the mental wellness of youth and young adults.

So why such grave and deep concern? One concern which this article focuses on is the affect of cannabis on the developing brain. Following are what the experts say.

*"There is a strong evidence-base showing that early and regular cannabis use can affect cognition, such as memory, attention, intelligence and the ability to process thoughts and experiences."*

**Dr. Renuka Prasad**, President of the Canadian Psychiatric Association.

*"Cannabis with high tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content can result in significantly worse mental health and cognitive outcomes, including worsening of panic disorder and other anxiety disorders."*

**Dr. Phil Tibbo**, Chair of the Canadian Consortium for Early Intervention in Psychosis.

*"We now have international data that support the fact that cannabis is a risk factor for psychosis for some, though not all, patients with schizophrenia, and those patients with a positive cannabis history need help to understand the negative effect of cannabis on psychosis."*

**Dr. Elsie-Marie Løberg**, University of Bergen in Norway.

*"The link between using pot and developing serious mental illness is strongest in the youngest smokers - 12- to 15-year-olds, or kids even younger."*

**Dr. Matthew Large**, University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia.

*"Simply put, cannabis should not be used by young people. It is toxic to their cortical neuronal networks, with both functional and structural changes seen in the brains of youth who use cannabis regularly."*

**Diane Kelsall**, Interim Editor-in-Chief of the Canadian Medical Association Journal.



## Cannabis and the Developing Brain

The Canadian Paediatric Society cautions that marijuana use in youth is strongly linked to “cannabis dependence and other substance use disorders; the initiation and maintenance of tobacco smoking; an increased presence of mental illness, including depression, anxiety and psychosis; impaired neurological development and cognitive decline; and diminished school performance and lifetime achievement.”

The bottom line is that the “endocannabinoid system” is involved in brain development, even during the adolescent time period where the ‘fine tuning’ occurs. The cannabinoid receptors for this system are primarily on white matter in adolescents and not in their adult configuration (more on grey matter) until adulthood. This is why cannabis can have a different effect on the brain developmentally in adolescents than in adulthood.

Dr. Candice Crocker of the Nova Scotia Early Psychosis Program and Dr. Phil Tibbo, Chair of the Canadian Consortium for Early Intervention in Psychosis state:

### *What’s importantly needed now is:*

1. *public education targeting youth and young adults about the effects early cannabis use can have on brain development;*
2. *further research to better understand the impact of cannabis and its legalization on mental health and;*
3. *expanded support for prevention, early identification and cannabis cessation treatments within the framework of mental health and addictions.*

#### **1. Cannabis use can contribute to the development of psychosis.**

Regular cannabis use, particularly in early adolescence and with high THC content strains, is associated with an increased risk of developing psychosis and schizophrenia. Regular adolescent use also lowers the age of onset. This risk is potentially increased in vulnerable youth

#### **2. Cannabis use may worsen symptoms of depression.**

While there is a smaller body of literature compared to cannabis and psychosis investigations, cannabis use has been positively associated with symptoms of depression. A recent metaanalysis reported an increased risk of depression following heavy cannabis use starting at early ages. Adolescent use may also increase the risk of suicide.

#### **3. Cannabis use can worsen symptoms of anxiety.**

A positive association has been found between anxiety disorders and cannabis use in the general population. In particular, longitudinal research which adjusted for substance use, education, and family situation has found that adolescent cannabis use was associated with anxiety in young adulthood.

#### **4. Regular use of cannabis can impair cognitive function.**

Neuropsychological research report that regular cannabis use in adolescence can impair working memory, visual scanning, learning and cognitive flexibility. Improvement in some of these domains on cessation may occur, but not all.

#### **5. Cannabis use can affect brain development**

Cannabis, thru its effects on the endocannabinoid system, may alter brain structure and function during the adolescent phase of brain development. This can affect both grey and white matter structures, including reported changes in cortical thickness and hippocampal volumes that may not be reversible in individuals who began use prior to the age of 16.

#### **6. The human brain continues to develop until around the age of 25.**

Use of cannabis prior to that age can negatively affect the brain’s healthy maturation process. That’s why many professionals advocated prior to legalization that legal access to cannabis be restricted to age 21 and over, and that legislation should restrict the quantity and potency of the drug until age 25.

I am often asked, “Who is the person at greatest risk.” The younger the age, the frequency of use, and the potency of the cannabis, that person is at a greater risk. If mental illness is in the family history, the risk increases 5 to 7 fold that the person will develop cannabis induced psychosis which then may lead to life-long schizophrenia. ■

The Schizophrenia Society of Canada has produced [www.cannabisandpsychosis.ca](http://www.cannabisandpsychosis.ca) as a youth participatory project geared towards youth. Another great resource is [www.teenmentalhealth.org](http://www.teenmentalhealth.org).

#### **AUTHOR BIO**

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Since 1995 Chris has been the Executive Director of the Manitoba Schizophrenia Society, providing leadership and supervision to a team of 17 located in the home office in Winnipeg and the eight regional outreach offices throughout Manitoba. Since 2007 Chris has also served as CEO of the Schizophrenia Society of Canada.

# Legalization of cannabis: an opportunity for schools

By: Dan Reist



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The deficit perspective, so dominant in our society, conditions us to focus on challenges in the face of change. Yet change also brings opportunities. This article encourages principals and other school leaders to consider a more asset-focused approach to cannabis legalization.

Cannabis – like other psychoactive substances – has been used by humans for thousands of years. Legalization provides adults who use cannabis with a safe supply produced and sold under strict regulation. Cannabis use and possession among youth is still prohibited. Yet the legalization of cannabis use for adults provides schools with an opportunity to help students develop a broader understanding of drug use and the skills to manage cannabis and other drugs in preparation for adulthood.

A primary responsibility of schools is to develop literacy. This involves far more than teaching students to decode oral or written language. To be literate, students must be able to analyse the meaning and utility of texts as well as reflect on the influence those texts may have on them. In this sense, “literacy is a social practice, with political and economic potentials and ramifications” (Freebody & Luke, 1990, p. 15). Definitions of literacy include both technical and purposive elements. Literacy is the “proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential” (National Institute for Literacy, cited in Pearson & Saunders, 2009, p. 287). Within the broad category of literacy, one can distinguish a wide range of literacies: e.g., computer literacy, cultural literacy, financial literacy, media literacy, scientific literacy, and—health literacy.

Health literacy is an asset “enabling individuals to exert greater control over their health and the range of personal, social and environmental determinants of health” (Nutbeam, 2008, p. 2074). This can be thought of at several levels. At a basic functional level, health literacy involves rudimentary reading and writing skills and foundational knowledge about health conditions and immediate determinants. Yet, health literacy also involves communicative and social skills needed to make sense of health-related information and apply it in changing circumstances. At a still deeper level, health literacy entails the capacity to critically analyse information in order to influence the social, economic and environmental determinants of health in pursuit of individual and collective well-being (Chinn, 2011).



## Cannabis Opportunity

Schools now have increased opportunity to build health literacy related to cannabis. Young people benefit from developing competencies that will allow them to grow and thrive in their communities—communities in which cannabis use is now legal for adults. Children will continue to receive mixed messages about cannabis. The emerging industry will extol the benefits. Pop culture idols, peers, parents and other adults will provide mixed examples. Traditional health messaging will warn of the potential harms. How will young people make sense of these conflicting messages?

As they grow up, youth will be best served by having a more complete understanding of cannabis, and substance use more generally, which could provide students with the confidence to make informed decisions about cannabis and other drug use. Legalization, by removing a taboo, offers schools a unique opportunity to advance students' educational goals, and help them develop critical thinking skills for life in an ever-changing world.

Most health education (including education about drugs) has focused on risk and behaviour change. This assumes that health is an individual quality and risk is embodied in lifestyle choices. The aim of this education is to change behaviour in pre-determined ways through the provision of information and the persuasion techniques of social marketing. This approach to health education has not been able to demonstrate effectiveness relative to its goal of behaviour change. Even if this approach could be made effective, there is concern about its ethical desirability—telling people how we think they ought to live (Buchanan, 2006, 2008).

A more humanistic and democratic paradigm for health education recognizes that health is influenced by living conditions as well as lifestyle choices and that students, individually and collectively, need to develop action competence in order to increase their ability to take action and generate changes to improve their well-being (Jensen, 2000). Fundamental to this model is a commitment to health literacy (Renwick, 2017). A robust health literacy helps students develop the capacity to interact with environments in which drug use is common. It helps them explore who they are, learn how to make informed decisions, and develop critical thinking and strategies they can call upon when facing new and challenging situations. Health literacy provides children and youth with the knowledge and skills to process the often conflicting information to which they are exposed and make healthy, responsible choices (Renwick, 2017).

Thus, the role of education in this process is to help children learn how to think (not tell them what to think). This means shifting our pedagogy toward inquiry or constructivist education—changing

the focus from content to capacity. Critical competencies for drug literacy might include the capacity to:

- assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and well-being of individuals, families, communities and societies
- explore and appreciate diversity in the reasons people use drugs, the impacts of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs. bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- develop personal and social strategies to manage the risks, benefits and harms related to drugs

Since drug use has been integral in human history and development, these competencies cut across all subject areas. Opportunities abound in English Language Arts, Social Studies, Science and Mathematics, among others. Traditional drug education efforts have not been successful partly because they have focused on drugs themselves rather than the place of drugs in past and present human societies.

In relation to cannabis, schools can promote critical thinking that will provide students the power to manage their own well-being as well as that of their communities. Ways schools can help include:

- Having open conversations about cannabis and drug use that encourage students to apply the same critical skills they use to learn about other topics inside and outside of school
- Asking more questions that encourage reflection and dialogue, rather than stating a “fact” which tends to shut down conversation or spark unproductive debate
- Using existing curriculum to explore the human phenomenon of drug use while studying different cultures and historical periods, or drawing attention to allusions to drugs in literature or other texts, nurtures critical thinking about drugs in a wide range of learning contexts

Some students might decide to use cannabis despite the legal restrictions. When these situations occur, they can create an opportunity for teachers, administrators and students to discuss the complex nature of cannabis, who uses it, and why. Such an open discussion can help young people decide for themselves what role cannabis may, or may not, have in their lives and how, as communities, we can best live together. After all, this is what education is all about. ■

### AUTHOR BIO

**Dan Reist** is an Assistant Director at the University of Victoria's Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research. He is the lead investigator in the development of the iMinds approach to drug/gambling education. [www.cisur.ca](http://www.cisur.ca)

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# Seeing the World Through Their Eyes

By: Heather Halman, B.Com. B.A., M.A., C.E.L.



*Adult education students with special needs explore the world through digital photography.*



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*Have you ever taken a photograph that brings back wonderful memories of a special life event? Have you ever taken a photo of a family member who is no longer with us that you treasure? Do you often look over your photos and wish that you could go back to that place and time? Have you ever looked at a photo in a magazine and said, “I wish that I could take pictures like that!” Well, if you answered “yes” to any one of these questions then you can appreciate the impact that photography can have both personally, and in an educational setting.*

As an educator, I believe that sometimes the best way to get the most out of the learning experience in the classroom, is to leave it and to take the learning outdoors and into the community. Exploration of the surrounding natural environment is especially important in the world of photography. In the adult education sector, we are always in search of innovative ideas and opportunities to engage our students of all age levels and experiences. This is particularly relevant for our students with special needs who face many varied learning and communication challenges on a daily basis in a traditional classroom setting. It was our belief that using digital technology could level the playing field for these students with special needs and enable them to experience success in different ways.

With this in mind, in Adult Education at the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board in Laval Quebec, we embarked on a new initiative with a program developed for our group of students with special needs which uses digital photography as therapy. This group of Social Insertion Services or “SIS”, offers a specialized program where adults over the age of 21, with varying intellectual difficulties and challenges, and or physical disabilities, come to school to be able to integrate into the local community and ultimately into the world of work. Offering these students the opportunity to learn about photography as a way to express themselves visually was the plan when developing this new offer of service to our clients.

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Through the structure and organization of this course, our students learned the basics of how to use a digital camera to take pictures, how to analyze the composition of their pictures, how to perfect the lighting and shadows, and, how to best tell the story they wished to communicate. Outdoor excursions were organized for our adult students to be able to take photos in different and often challenging settings and to take pictures of moving objects. Together they discussed their creations, and then manipulated and modified them through cropping and other visual design applications.

A Facebook page was created by the group and they posted digital albums and commented on each other's photos on a daily basis. The students immediately became more engaged, excited to have this new opportunity and were very eager to share and display their photos. In fact, they made display boards and portfolios of their photos and presented them to several different groups of individuals in the school as well as at the school board. Their ability to collaborate on these types of meaningful and interesting projects was especially beneficial in the development and improvement of social as well as targeted academic skills.

The culminating activity was a special exposition at a meeting of all school Principals where the students presented their photos for sale. They developed the pricing and were able to do all of the financial transactions themselves. In addition to communication skills, this activity helped to develop the mathematical skills of budgeting, reasonable pricing, counting money and making change and put them into action in a meaningful context for our students.

Integrating this type of course into the competency-based curriculum came easily. As a social insertion program for adults with special needs, the learning is delivered through fourteen competencies which are life skills based in nature. Oral expression, communication with others, perspective-taking and understanding the world around them are competencies that are developed on a daily basis. Integrating digital photography course into this Ministry program was a means of providing a real context for the students' voices and creative talents.

Digital photography provided a new setting to take on challenges and to learn life skills without the students even realizing it. In addition to developing the competencies of the program, we discovered that through the lens of a camera our students were able to relieve stress and anxiety, develop social and communication skills, improve their motor skills and express their creativity in a new way. Our goal at the CDC Vimont Competency Development Center is to support all of our adult learners to enable them to be happy, responsible and productive members of the community, and this course supported our efforts far beyond our initial expectations.

Through the implementation we learned that photography as an art form breaks down many of the emotional and psychological barriers that make it difficult for adults with special needs to develop confidence and personal satisfaction. Our students learned that they were more self-sufficient, more focused and more capable than they had previously imagined. The research in education supports the fact that people with disabilities are often better able to express themselves in images rather than in words. All artists have their own unique vision and understanding of the world and the camera lens makes this expression an easy reality. Our students found their voice and themselves in the process of taking photographs, and they were learning to see themselves in a different way.

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As the Director of Adult Education, I am proud of what our Social Insertion Services students have accomplished and the fact that they were able to showcase their newfound talents with their families, other students and in the local community. The students developed unique new skills and abilities through the use of the digital cameras, which in turn, freed them from their disabilities and help them towards achieving their potential. Building on our initial successes, we are planning on expanding our program even further with video presentations in youth sector schools, providing the images for the school board

calendar and arranging card sales throughout the year to support other students in need. This is a wonderful way for others to see our center and what it has to offer adults of all ages and abilities, as well as provide a showcase for our very talented students. ■

#### AUTHOR BIO

**Heather Halman** is the Director of Adult Education at the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board, serving the Laval, Lanaudiere and the des Laurentides communities in Quebec.



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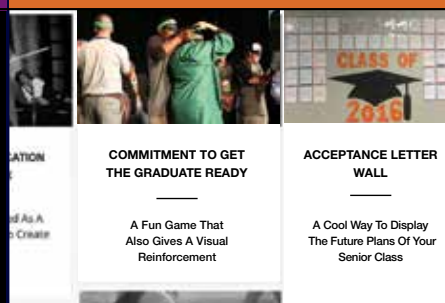
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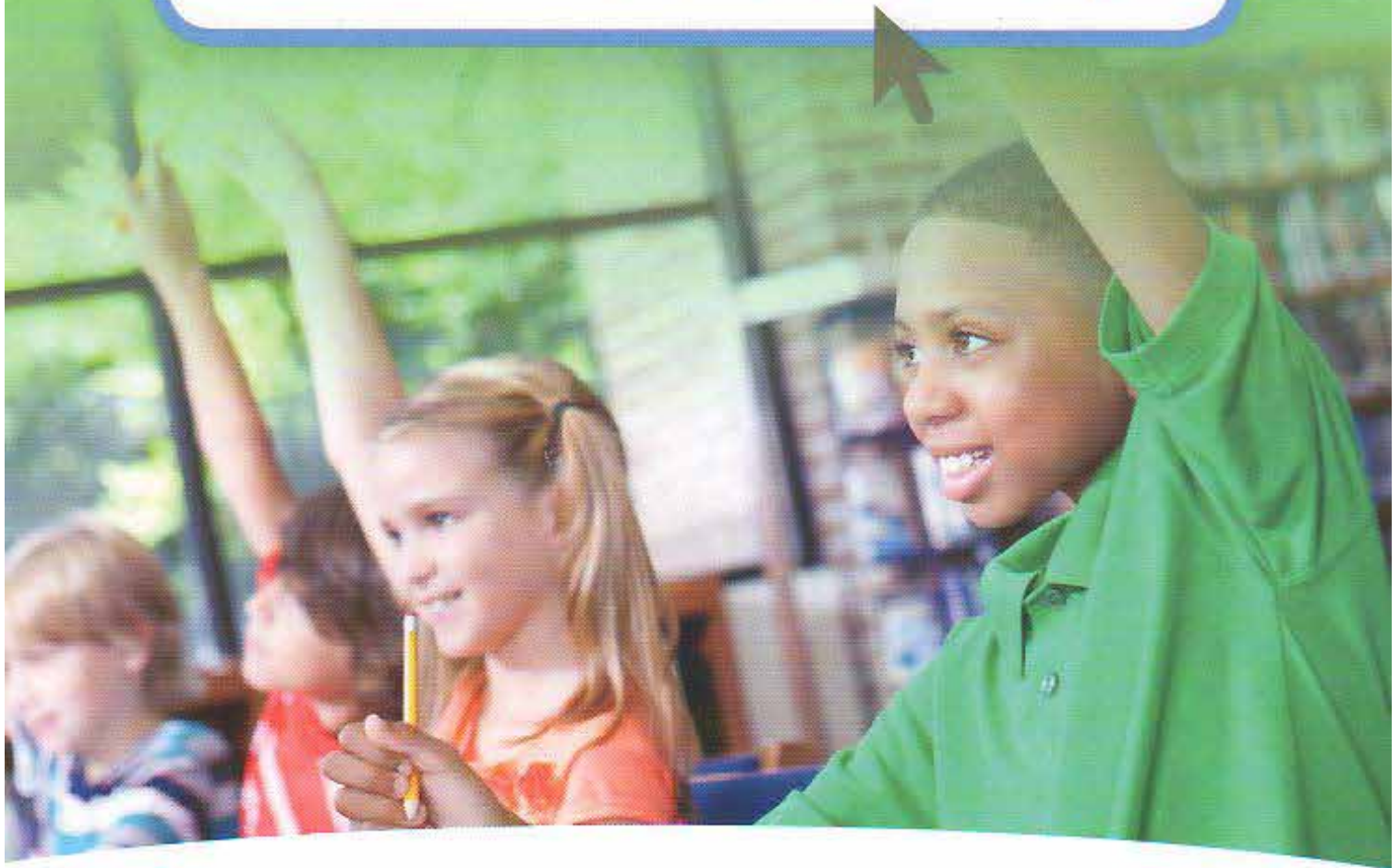
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