

# Where You Are

## S4 Episode 4 - Promoting Student Well-Being: The ABCs of Substance Use Education

### TRANSCRIPT:

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**Dave Mackenzie:** There's a much greater rule that a positive school culture can have with respect to building that sense of competency and autonomy and belonging in a school that's really central to kids leading a happy and healthy life.

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**Bryn Askwith:** This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith. Each season we produce an episode for school professionals. After all, educators spend a lot of time with students working to promote and support child and youth mental health. When it comes to substance use education, school professionals are an important resource. They can provide strategies that promote wellbeing and equip youth with the confidence, knowledge, and skills they need to make decisions about substances that they'll encounter as they grow.

Coming together with me today to talk about the ABCs of substance use education in schools are Dave Mackenzie and Art Steinmann. I'm also incredibly excited to be a co-hosting this episode with Cindy Andrews, who joined us as a guest on our substance use episode in season three. Let's get into that conversation.

Cindy, it is so great to have you back on the podcast. Thanks for joining me on the host side of the mic today. Do you want to just take a moment to reintroduce yourself to our listeners before we get started?

00:01:33

**Cindy Andrews:** Sure. Thanks, Bryn. It's really great to be here again and to join you in this podcast. I'm a mom of two now young adults, a former teacher who has since leaving teaching had the privilege of working alongside the education system, but more in the health promotion end of things, including of course in supporting schools and addressing substance use.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Yes, you've done lots and lots of years of work in that field, so we're so lucky to have you to join the conversation today. Cindy, do you mind just taking a little

bit of time to talk to us about some of your work around the ABCs of substance use education?

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**Cindy Andrews:** Sure. It is really about focusing on supporting the K- 12 system and the professionals that are a part of that system in supporting their practice and policies around evidence- aligned approaches to substance use in youth. It is a provincial project that is actually funded through the Ministry of Health and supported by the Ministry of Education and Childcare as well as the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions.

If you're curious about what the ABCs are, obviously we picked up on that very nature of education and that notion of fundamentals, but in this case, ABCs to us mean three really important distinctive attributes or protective factors, if you will. One is this notion of autonomy, that notion of youth having the capacity and the freedom to make decisions for themselves.

B is the belonging aspect, and I suspect all of our listeners very much appreciate just how critical that sense of belonging and the safety and the being part of a safe and caring community in school is such a vitally important protective factor for young people and for their health and wellbeing, and ultimately also their success as learners.

And then C is really around the notion of competencies. What are the knowledge and skills that young people need to navigate this world of ours where most of us and in fact for millennia have used substances of some type? I started my day- to- day with a beautiful dark roast coffee. That is good example of probably the most predominantly used substance in the world that many listeners can attest to is a really nice way to start a day. Does that help?

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**Bryn Askwith:** It absolutely does, and I think it sets us up really nicely to explore it in more detail with our first guest, Art Steinmann. Art is a Senior Associate, Youth Substance Use Health Promotion, at Bunyaad Public Affairs Inc. Art brings over 40 years of experience in substance use policy, education and health promotion work, including co- founding and co- developing SACY, Supporting and Connecting Youth program for the Vancouver School Board. He also works with Cindy on the ABCs of Youth Substance Use Project. Welcome to the podcast, Art.

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**Art Steinmann:** Oh, thank you so much, Bryn. Delighted to be here.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Cindy highlighted some of the work that you two have been doing together. Can you tell us a little bit more about the core areas of the initiative, like the acronym ABCs, along with some examples?

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**Art Steinmann:** A lot of people I think have a feeling that drug education or substance use prevention is about drugs and drug facts, and really that's a small part of it, the place for that for sure. But what we really want to try to do is get at the root issues. So often, if it's problematic substance use, so using large quantities, using frequently, using in ways that interfere with somebody's life, usually people that are doing that are trying to cope, they're trying to manage. They're trying to dull some of the pain that they may feel within themselves and other things like that. So what we want to try to do is get more at those root preventative issues. And so there's what we call protective factors, things that if we enhance them and build them up, they're going to put people at a lower likelihood of developing drug use problems when they decide to start to try different drugs.

Some of the strongest protective factors can be summed up in the ABCs, autonomy, belonging, and competence. So youths that have a good foundation in those three areas are going to be way ahead of the game in terms of avoiding mental health and substance use issues.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Before we hear more thoughts from Art on how to approach substance use education in schools, we wanted to talk to Dave Mackenzie, a school counselor and educator of more than 25 years. Dave is an active member of the mental health community in BC, member of the BC School Centred Mental Health Coalition, and president of the BC School Counselors Association. Welcome to Where You Are, Dave.

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**Dave Mackenzie:** Thank you very much. I really appreciate the opportunity to share some of my experiences, and I just want to acknowledge that I'm coming to you today from the traditional area of the Syilx People in the Okanagan territory.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Thank you. Dave, as a school counselor, you work directly with students as well as the school community as a whole regarding substance use education. We've just heard all about the ABCs of youth substance use, including the concepts of autonomy and belonging and competence and the role that they can play in preventing

and delaying and reducing substance- related harms. But the ABCs might not be what educators think of when it comes to reducing risks that can come with substances. So I'm wondering if you can share some examples of how you've personally fostered autonomy, belonging, and competency with students.

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**Dave Mackenzie:** Probably one of the more recent experiences would be as a sponsor of a extracurricular club in our school. I'm one of the co- sponsors of our Gay- Straight Alliance club in our school. As the club name indicates, we're focused on supporting kids and providing a space for kids to feel like they belong with a group of kids that share a similar perspective on how they see the world and how they operate within the world.

Sometimes the time we spend together is just about socializing and just about hanging out and sharing experiences, movies we watched, songs we're listening to, podcasts that we're listening to. And other times it's actually digging into some of the challenges that kids face amongst their peers, with their families, or out in their community. It's a safe space. It's a place, as I said, where they feel like they belong and they get to bring their experiences. That's the competency that they bring to that space, that their experiences are real, are invalid, good and bad, positive and negative, and we try to validate the things that they're doing to try to add more positivity to their life and the lives of their friends, as well as addressing some of the time the barriers that exist to experiencing that positiveness.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Are there some other examples at a school- wide level where some of the concepts of the ABCs have come into play?

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**Dave Mackenzie:** I know that the teachers who take on the role and the responsibility of student leadership in a school really do their best to try to focus on building an inclusive culture. This supports kids from all kinds of backgrounds and interests to spread those opportunities to connect and to demonstrate their skills and their passions throughout the year. But on a school- wide sort of platform, I think those teachers in the system who take on the job student leadership recognize that there's a much greater role that a positive school culture can have with respect to building that sense of competency and autonomy and belonging in a school that's really central to kids leading a happy and healthy life.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Oh, Dave, it's so wonderful to hear you share those examples. Those sorts of efforts and what you just shared, I didn't hear anything about, " We brought in a guest speaker. Made sure kids knew the facts and stats about all the different drugs out there." It was such a wonderful and powerful reminder and some really good examples of evidence- aligned strategies that we know make a difference in reducing harms around substance use and really do set young people up for healthy, rewarding lives. Have nothing to do with substance use and yet everything to do.

I'm going to segue to the next question, Dave. When it comes to starting conversations about substance use with students, I suspect that educators might be a bit apprehensive, not sure how to go about it or where to start. How can we increase educators confidence and comfort levels to have these conversations?

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**Dave Mackenzie:** What I think we also have to acknowledge is a lot of times those conversations are happening in private and they need to be public. The lack of comfort levels, the apprehension that the conversations are important, and those conversations are a part of our job. It may be not your specific role as a math teacher, but it's your role to connect with kids. And to provide guidance and wisdom, and to really focus on the fact that the students also have their own sense of wisdom that we hope guides the decisions that they make with their friends. I think we've done a good job and we still have work to do when it comes to opening up the conversation around mental health, so that when kids are ready to talk, they know that they're going to meet with somebody who's comfortable with those topics and that they're going to be treated with respect and dignity when they raise that issue or a concern that they might have.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Wow, so much wisdom in what you just shared including, and thank you for acknowledging that the wisdom is often not always in the room amongst a group of young people themselves. I wondered if you want to just give another couple of examples of how you think perhaps the ABCs project could help in terms of supporting those educators who are wanting to grow their practice in this area.

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**Dave Mackenzie:** This notion of a community of practice, where people with the similar interest and a motivation to want to connect with other people doing similar work, with the idea of increasing your confidence and your skill level and increasing the strength of the voice with respect to issues around substance use. And I'll include mental health in that, and you could even include sexual health in that. I think we've come a long way where we didn't want to talk about sexual health in schools because there was a notion amongst some of the public that, well, if we talk about it, then they're going to start doing

it. Well, the reality is they're already doing it, and that applies to substance use. Kids are using substances. Us not talking about it doesn't make it go away. In fact, actually it makes it more hidden and I do believe it increases the risk of tragedies in our communities and our schools and our families.

In terms of increasing the confidence level of educators is providing some ongoing regular training and ongoing regular opportunities to connect with other educators and other allied professionals in the community.

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**Cindy Andrews:** I couldn't agree more, Dave, and I think creating that space and the intention around just as we want to walk alongside and support kids, we need to be doing the same with the adults in their lives.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I know when it comes to substance use education and approaches in school, many parents and caregivers are curious to know what's going on. And Dave, I suspect in your role, you've connected with families often, and so I'm just wondering, do you have any tips for how educators can engage parents and caregivers or pass on some of these approaches to them?

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**Dave Mackenzie:** This isn't a non- issue for kids and it is likely not to be a non- issue for your kids. So trying to start those regular and keep those regular conversations going, trying to make sure that your first point of contact's not to highlight an issue or a challenge with a young person, but to talk about their strengths and to talk about the things that they're good at as a mechanism for addressing maybe the challenges that they're experiencing. How can we use that strength in their sport or in their passion for art to address a challenge that they might be having that's related to a substance use issue.

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**Cindy Andrews:** I also think it's really important to remind ourselves, well, it's of course natural to expect experimentation, it's a natural tendency to want to say, "I want to explore adult- like behaviours," et cetera, et cetera. That most young people who use substances do not go on and have a problematic relationship with substances, and I think that's really important to remember. I think creating that space and that sort of normalizing of this can often be typical adolescent behaviours and how do you have those conversations with kids?

One of my all-time favorite quotes from a young person was, "They tell us to drink responsibly, but they," whoever they is, "don't help us learn what that means." So kids are also asking for these conversations and I'm happy to report that ABC project, as you know, have done a podcast specifically for parents and caregivers that give people some ideas. I hope it's useful for educators as well because it can apply in their own personal lives, but also some ideas that might be sparked for within the classroom setting.

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**Bryn Askwith:** And thank you, Cindy, for reminding us about that podcast, Substance Use: Talking alcohol, vaping and other drugs with your kids. That's also on our Kelty podcast episode page and I'll put that episode in the show notes.

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**Cindy Andrews:** We've talked about how the ABCs, so that notion of autonomy, belonging and competencies and how educators can promote these protective factors with the young people that they connect with at an individual level. And you've touched on some school-wide levels and I think the GSA alliance is a good example of that. So when you think about it from a systems' perspective, is there anything else that you think would be helpful as we work together to support educators and ultimately the young people that we serve?

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**Dave Mackenzie:** So for me, it's time, space, permission and recognition. It's time to do the work, it's space to do the work, it's permission to do the work, and then let's recognize the work that's being done. The adults in the building were young people too, they're just older now. They can also benefit from having their sense of autonomy be respected, having time and space to be able to belong to a group of people that are interested in doing the same thing, and given opportunities to build their competence. When a young person finds themselves struggling with an addiction, there isn't one answer. There's not one solution. There's not one therapy that's going to make a difference. It's going to require just as it does in the adult world, the collaboration and the cooperation of a whole bunch of different people from a whole bunch of different perspectives. And we're really good at it when we do it together. Bringing those opportunities to have us come together, I think is what kids expect that we're doing. And there's lots of adults that want that to happen too.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I think that's an absolutely perfect takeaway and so thank you so much.

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**Dave Mackenzie:** Thank you.

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**Bryn Askwith:** You're listening to Where You Are. I'm Bryn Askwith. Looking for more child and youth mental health resources for school professionals? Find them on our website at [keltymentalhealth.ca/school-professionals](http://keltymentalhealth.ca/school-professionals). Thanks again, Dave, so much for joining us here on where you are now. Let's hear more from Art Steinmann.

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**Cindy Andrews:** So when you have conversations with youth about substance use, what's the evidence, say about what's more promising? What tends to work versus what we should encourage people to stay clear of?

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**Art Steinmann:** As adults, as a parent, as a teacher, and I'm both of those, it's easy to come with this mindset of I really care about this kid. I really don't want them hurt. I don't want them to have problems. So by golly, I'm going to tell them what they need to do. Unfortunately, that doesn't work very well. Much more effective is to come alongside, try to formulate a connection. And so as we build trust with youth, they will start to open up a little bit more. And how we respond when they finally break up the courage to maybe say one little sentence about what they actually think about something, it's hugely important. The conversations that work really are more... I think a word that I prefer even better than conversation is dialogue and it's a back and forth. So the young people can sense very quickly if we actually care two pins about what they think or not, if we actually respect what they think or not.

And so there's things that we can do to show that yes, actually we are really interested to learn what they think, what their perspectives are. No, does that mean they know everything? Does that mean there's no role for us? No, of course not. But the things are so balanced, so far pushed the other way right now. We really have to work hard to pull it back in this other direction.

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**Cindy Andrews:** So something that I think perhaps in your work and mine too, we've heard teachers express some apprehension, a little bit of worry about saying the wrong thing or a fear of how to go about starting these kinds of conversations. I think we know, and this is a big part of the ABC's effort, is to stress you do not need to be a drug expert to have conversations with young people to help equip them for this world of ours where most of us use substances in some shape or form and are living healthy, happy,

productive lives. But I guess that fear factor, if you will, is something that I think... I'm curious about your take and suggestions of what you think would be helpful.

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**Art Steinmann:** There's a lot of reasons why teachers could be hesitant to get into this area. And a lot of young people, if they get the message, they come into class and teacher says, "We're going to do a little discussing or dialoguing on substance use." A lot of young people go, "Okay, I know where this is going. I've heard it before. I don't need any of this." And so it's not like the teacher and the students are coming together in this warm open environment of, "Hey, yeah, let's learn more about this. This will be really interesting." So you're off to a rough start.

There are specific things that can be done both at the individual level. So the classroom teacher can work with groups like ABCs and others to learn about evidence-based resources that are effective and have been shown to be effective. I've had many experiences of classroom engagement using... One that comes to mind is we used to ask some, "What are all the firsts that you will have in your life between age 17 and 19?" Oh, well, I'll get my driver's license. Oh, have a romantic relationship. Oh, break up a romantic relationship. Pass math. Fail math. Get a job. Learn to drive a car. All these things. We would list all of these and they would brainstorm all this.

And then we would say, "Okay, what do you think would happen if you were using a lot of substances during those years from 17 to 19? Would any of these things be impacted?" Oh, they might be. Well, what would that look like? And again, they're being careful not to get into exaggeration, scare tactics, any of that. So there's all kinds of scenarios that you can explore and discuss with kids. And the goals are to help youth if they're not using to delay, to keep putting it off till they're a bit older.

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**Cindy Andrews:** So much great stuff in what you were sharing Art. What really stood out for me too is this notion of getting curious alongside the students. So I'm going to take us now beyond the classroom. Thinking about educators at large, so administrators, school counselors, teachers and others, can you give us some examples there of what it can look like relative to where the evidence points us to in terms of evidence-based approaches to substance use?

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**Art Steinmann:** Well, the evidence is very clear. Punitive approaches and fear-based approaches are not helpful and it drives the behaviour underground. Kids learn not to talk about it, they either hide it better. So what is helpful is a strengths-based approach.

So talking school climate, school environment where youth are welcomed, they're regarded with dignity and respect, they're regarded as resources not as problems. When youth begin to get that sense of that environment, they start to feel safe, they start to feel trust, they start to open up more. So teachers, administrators, district staff, support staff, custodians, all of us can play a role.

I feel though, for all the adults in the system, because in my opinion, we really do need a reframe. The go-to approach is that more simplistic black and white drugs are bad, you're bad if you use it. And then we feel a pressure to really enforce that. And what we want to do is strengthen young people's ability to manage to navigate this complex world, including all the mixed messages about drug abuse. So I think we need a huge job of professional development, opportunities for teachers where they can learn more about this topic. One of the things that comes up is your own personal background and experience and values and biases around this. And it's really important to work through that.

What's important is to view yourself as a public health educator. We need a public health model, not my values, not your values, not someone's individual biases. We need evidence-based messaging that is going to help the youth to engage their brain to think through for themselves, "What do I think about this? What are my goals? What are my values? And will getting drunk, binge drinking every weekend help me learn to play the guitar better or not because that's one of my goals, or might it interfere with my ability to do that? So it's a basic public health model and once people learn it, they feel relief, they feel more empowered to implement it. But to be honest, we haven't scaled it up to the level that teachers or even counselors... Even if every counselor in the system is really grounded in this, that would be so helpful.

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**Cindy Andrews:** I'm glad Art to hear you also mention one really important... I mean, it's not only an approach, it also represents really important organization, that being public health. For any given school community, there are public health professionals working alongside and many will be in a position where they would eagerly work with and support educators to explore, for instance, professional learning opportunities, to benefit from the wisdom that public health has, and also apply that to the school setting, working in partnership with schools. We all know that it takes a village to help the young person flourish, and that certainly is the case when it comes to how we approach substance use education. My hope from this conversation is it will help articulate the need for yes, that ongoing communication of these lifesaving, life-changing kinds of conversations and skill building that we need to have with kids, and that we can do this.

We have the wherewithal, we have the system, we have the resources that can help us, and we're in it together.

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**Bryn Askwith:** And I know Cindy and Art as well, you guys have mentioned some wonderful resources along the way during our conversation today. And so we'll add those to the show notes for sure that are specific to substance use education and information for educators.

Well, I know we're getting close to our time together here on the podcast today. Art, I'm wondering if you have any final thoughts or words of wisdom that you would want to share with the school professionals listening to this episode.

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**Art Steinmann:** Teachers please know so much of what you do is actually drug prevention because you are building relationships, you are developing capable, confident, young people, and those are the pillars. There's lots of hope here and let's just get more systematic and more organized so that we can really make an impact so that more kids have a full, fulfilling life and don't run into problems in this area.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Thanks Art.

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**Art Steinmann:** Thank you, Bryn. Thank you, Cindy.

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**Cindy Andrews:** Thank you. Bryn, it's been great co-hosting this episode with you. Thanks so much for the invitation and thank you to the listeners. There's a lot to this topic and I'm so grateful for people spending the time to listen in and are eager to learn more about what they can do to support their practice as we work together to help young people across BC thrive.

00:26:21

**Bryn Askwith:** Thanks, Cindy. Likewise. This episode of Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Keltly Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Emily Morantz, with audio engineering by Sam Seguin, and audio production by JAR Audio. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a rating wherever you might be listening now.

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