kdehub
Youth Substance Use Prevention
through knowledge development
and exchange

2025 YSUPP Annual Symposium

World Café Discussion Highlights

February 2026

OVERVIEW

The Youth Substance Use Prevention Program (YSUPP) is a national initiative funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada that seeks to prevent substance use and promote wellness among Canadian youth. It includes thirteen project teams currently implementing the Icelandic Prevention Model (IPM) in diverse communities across Canada. The Knowledge Development and Exchange Hub (KDE Hub) supports connections and learning among projects funded through YSUPP in several ways, including hosting symposiums.

The inaugural YSUPP Annual Symposium was held on November 25 and 26, 2025. It included World Café sessions designed to facilitate peer-to-peer knowledge exchange on areas of shared interest.

A guiding question was used to explore priority areas within the IPM and to pool ideas, knowledge, and experiences:

What does effective and sustainable implementation of the Icelandic Prevention Model look like and what makes that possible?

The World Café took place over two days and included 20-minute rounds of facilitated conversation. Participants selected discussion topics at registration and took part in three rounds on the first day and two on the second, allowing them to explore and contribute to five topic areas. Each round started with a few minutes of solo time in which participants were offered the guiding question and topic-specific prompts. They were encouraged to jot down their initial ideas on large sheets of paper at

Input from members of the YSUPP community informed the selection of eight topic areas that reflect key IPM implementation challenges and opportunities:

- **Creating buy-in and shared ownership**
- **Using data for action**
- **Influencing local systems and policies**
- **Implementing in rural and remote contexts**
- **Engaging parents and caregivers**
- **Implementing in Indigenous contexts**
- **Building and sustaining coalitions**
- **Emerging factors in youth substance use**

their table before group discussion began. Facilitators recorded insights and provided brief summaries of previous conversations to support continuity and the ability to build on previous groups' discussions. The approach was adapted from Parkhurst et al. (2016)*.

This document offers highlights for each topic across the two days of conversation.

DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS

Creating buy-in and shared ownership

Aligning with existing values, strengths, and momentum can be helpful when seeking community buy-in. This requires collaboration with community members who have a deep understanding of community assets. Engaging the community in value-based action planning may also be helpful to surface what matters most in each context, and potential areas to avoid. Supporting existing community initiatives that align with the IPM demonstrates that this approach complements, and does not compete with, current efforts. Strengthening community capacity to lead, integrating the IPM into existing mandates and strategies, and providing community micro-grants can also be meaningful demonstrations of this alignment.

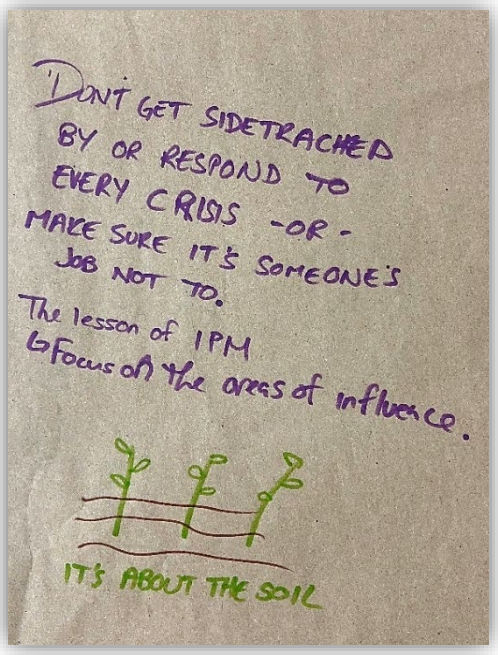
Engaging diverse perspectives and experience aligns IPM work with community realities and ensures commitment from those with complementary but unique mandates. Extra efforts may be needed to engage individuals with decision-making authority who can influence practice and allocate resources. Additionally, engaging multiple people within committed groups can support succession planning, allowing work to continue even if people leave their roles.

Sustaining a coordinating role is critical to collective efforts, especially when these are carried out by partner groups (e.g., public health, school, parents). A dedicated coordinating body or role

* Parkhurst, M., Preskill, H., & Gopal, S. (2016). Guide to the World Café Method. FSG.

helps knit together partners' engagement and maintain momentum over time. Core funding for this role is highly valued by IPM implementers.

Incorporating prevention into government strategies should be a priority for those who are embedded in or connected to governments. Advocating for long-term funding is essential because while prevention can generate significant returns on investment, these returns often require more time than a four-year election cycle.



Safeguarding an upstream focus is essential to success. In prevention work, the goal is to address the conditions – or "soil" – that give rise to poor health, yet this focus can be lost when crises arise. Protecting an upstream approach requires anticipating that crises will occur and making plans that allow prevention efforts to continue. Where possible, this includes protected time to ensure that prevention work is not sidelined, even as others take on crisis response and management roles.

Using data for action

Making data engaging means presenting findings clearly and transparently. This includes being open about the data collection process and acknowledging any limitations or missing data. Communities should not be overwhelmed with excessive information; instead, communication should prioritize the most relevant insights tailored to specific audiences. Data is most meaningful when rooted in and reflects community voice and experience. Using visually appealing and easily digestible ways to present data (e.g., infographics, videos) can support this process, particularly for youth audiences.

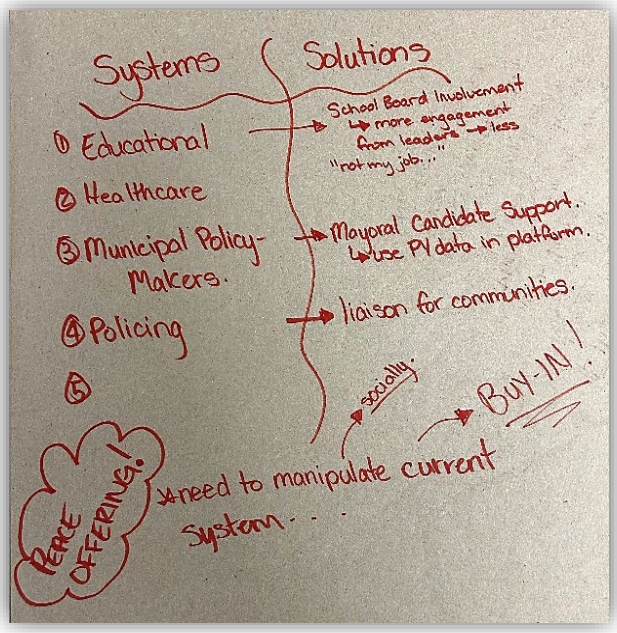
Balancing numbers and qualitative stories can provide a more accurate understanding of local perspectives. While data can elevate community realities and voices that may not otherwise reach decision-makers, care must be taken in how data are interpreted and used, as power dynamics in analysis and sharing can influence whose voices are amplified or lost. Overreliance on quantitative data risks reducing lived experience to numbers, stripping away context and meaning. Observe and listen to youth to capture important context and perceptions that may not emerge through a structured survey. Ultimately, meaningful data looks different for different

audiences, and effective communication may involve pairing data with stories that resonate with youth, parents, the public, and funders.

Encouraging data ownership helps create buy-in because partners see meaningful opportunities to get involved. This requires convening key partners, presenting data in an accessible and engaging way, and ensuring partners have authentic opportunities to voice their perspectives and take a lead on action. It is important to consult community members on their data sharing and sense making preferences and to build their capacity to engage with and understand the data.

Using a strengths-based approach can be critical to sustaining partner buy-in. In some instances, student survey findings may reveal discouraging youth trends within a particular school or community. Negative outcomes can create a sense of exposure or vulnerability, and some findings may even be discounted if community members feel they do not reflect their children. Emphasizing the hopeful spirit of the IPM is critical. Remind audiences that the goal is to nurture the environment so that youth can thrive. Invite conversations with concerned partners and present negative findings in a way that explores challenges without assigning blame. Where possible, frame data to highlight strengths (e.g., rather than only focusing on percentage of students who feel unsafe, highlight the proportion who do feel safe and explore what's working for them). By focusing on strengths and opportunities, even challenging data can inform positive change and engagement.

Influencing local systems and policies



Shifting the focus from a project-based approach to a systems-based approach strengthens effectiveness and sustainability. Addressing upstream youth outcomes such as reduced substance use benefits from integrating the IPM model into various local systems, which often include education, health care, municipal governance, and policing. Building relationships with key system actors can be challenging due to misaligned priorities, political differences, turnover, and short-term appointments. However, the IPM's status as a local health initiative can be leveraged strategically (e.g., through mayoral proclamations, social media campaigns, and

other platforms) to amplify its impact. Embedding IPM principles into formal policies and plans helps maintain continuity as part of local systems despite political or organizational turnover.

Using mechanisms for ownership and accountability, such as guiding documents, formal agreements tied to resources (e.g., MOUs and MOAs), and regular review cycles, help ensure partners follow through on commitments. Policy-aligned accountability moves collaboration beyond goodwill toward sustained action.

Legitimizing long-term investments and short-term indicators requires greater understanding of upstream prevention – what it means tangibly, and how it works (e.g., that this is an upfront investment for future pay-off). Markers of success are there along the way and IPM implementers should work to legitimize shorter-term indicators and outcomes.

Changing mental models is a common challenge for influencing local systems and an important leverage point. Because youth substance use is deeply connected to the environments that they live and grow in, IPM implementers may need to work to address social norms, such as how communities define fun, socializing, and belonging.

Advocating for policies that align with local priorities can reinforce healthier norms and unite key actors around a shared vision for youth wellbeing. Local policy change is one of the most powerful levers for sustaining IPM implementation, as policies shape social, built, and natural environments, creating upstream conditions that support prevention and reduce reliance on short-term interventions. Conversely, policies that conflict with IPM goals (e.g., fewer restrictions on the proximity of alcohol or cannabis retailers to schools; easier access to addictive substances) can undermine these efforts.

Engaging schools as system partners is a fundamental aspect of successful IPM implementation in Canada. However, capacity constraints, competing surveys, and policy barriers are common challenges that require tailored approaches. What works in one school may not work for another. Involving a school board member can facilitate greater endorsement by school councils. Working to influence school board policies, coordinating survey requirements, and offering practical support can reduce burden and increase long-term engagement.

Striving for stable, long-term funding is essential to influencing systems and policies, which takes perseverance, continuity, and time. Dedicated resources allow communities to move beyond volunteer-driven models, invest in skilled staff, and engage meaningfully with decision-makers who have the authority to shift practice, infrastructure, and budgets. To achieve this, communities may aim to secure multi-year grants, build partnerships with funders, clearly demonstrate need and impact through data and stories, and align initiatives with policy priorities to strengthen funding proposals.

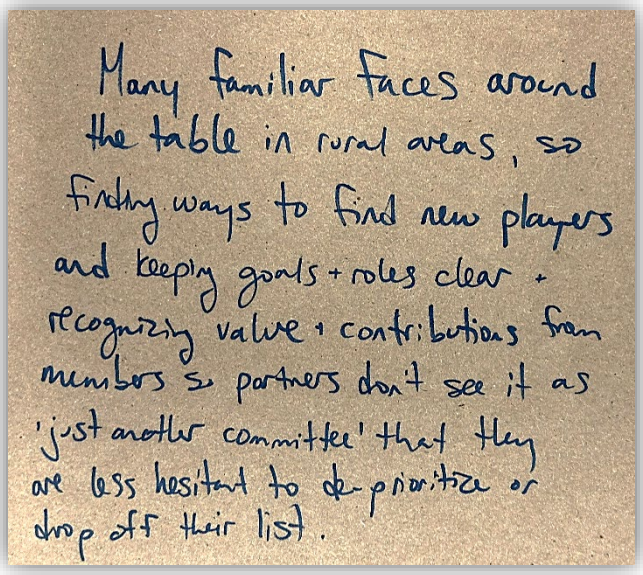
Elevating community and youth voice to influence decision-makers helps impact local systems. Policy change becomes possible when communities are organized, vocal, and supported by local data and lived experience. Engaged parents, youth councils, and community champions may influence elected officials by linking prevention to community vibrancy, votes, and long-term outcomes.

Implementing in rural and remote contexts

Navigating transportation challenges is an important aspect of IPM implementation within and across rural communities. Youth may struggle to access programs, often relying on walking or buses that are time-consuming, weather-dependent, or unsafe. These logistical challenges can limit participation and engagement, making it essential to plan programs with flexible scheduling, transportation support, or mobile/outdoor options that reduce reliance on traditional infrastructure.

Connecting across geographic spread is another essential consideration. Communities are often dispersed across large areas, with residents who may have very different needs and priorities. This diversity requires tailored approaches to ensure programs are relevant and accessible in each area.

Mobilizing paid IPM staff, recruiting new champions, and sharing responsibilities across sectors can help sustain engagement while minimizing volunteer fatigue. Rural communities often rely on the same small group of volunteers, which can lead to burnout, limited diversity, and difficulty distinguishing IPM work from other local initiatives. Leveraging the resourcefulness and collaborative nature of these communities is also key to maintaining momentum.



Leveraging access to natural spaces within rural and remote areas through land-based programs allows youth to engage with the seasons and elements, literally meeting youth where they are. It is important to challenge perceptions that outdoor spaces are barren or unsafe, a view

rooted in colonial thinking, and instead recognize the educational, social, and cultural value of connecting youth with land and nature.

Fostering local relationships is very important in close-knit rural communities. Familiarity with local politics, community history, and cultural norms is essential for gaining trust and mobilizing local champions, including business and faith leaders. Programs that prioritize community engagement, build on existing networks, and recognize the strengths of rural communities are more likely to be accepted, effective, and sustainable.

Engaging parents/caregivers

Recognizing parent/caregiver expertise, listening to their needs, and emphasizing their strengths helps create a foundation of trust and collaboration. Parents/caregivers are key knowledge holders and can play a pivotal role in a program's success. They may act as "gatekeepers", influencing participation and engagement. Care should be taken in sharing information so that parents/caregivers feel informed and supported, rather than guilty or blamed for challenges their children may face. Clear accountability and demonstrating tangible benefits ensure parents/caregivers feel their time and contributions are valued.

Building school buy-in can be an essential step to parent/caregiver engagement. For example, fostering relationships with superintendents or other key school leaders can support broader engagement, including with parents and caregivers. Framing conversations around positive messaging (e.g., focusing on belonging, connection, and education rather than substance use) sets a constructive tone and encourages participation.

Creating micro-moments for connection (i.e., small, meaningful interactions) can foster trust and engagement. Gathering around food, community events, sports, or arts programs allows families to connect naturally where positive momentum already exists. Engaging local champions and hosting casual events, such as a hot breakfast or pizza night, helps parents/caregivers participate without feeling singled out or pressured.

Leveraging family-friendly incentives and support, such as passes to recreational activities, can increase participation. Engaging youth participants to encourage family involvement strengthens the link between the program and households.

Implementing in Indigenous contexts

Using a culturally informed approach requires deep respect for Indigenous knowledges as complex, relational, and rooted in wisdom. Language matters, as does identifying and unlearning personal and institutional bias. Indigenous partners, Elders, and youth must guide what is important in health promotion work. Additionally, it is important to prioritize fair remuneration, culturally appropriate timelines, relationship-building grounded in trust, cultural safety, following principles of OCAP®, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

Building relationships and trust is vital for effective and sustainable implementation in Indigenous contexts. Listening more than speaking, meeting first with Elders and/or Knowledge Keepers, and maintaining communication even when participation is limited demonstrate goodwill and cultural safety.

Centering youth leadership within Indigenous contexts must be part of the IPM approach. Rather than asking "what is wrong with young people," it is critical to examine the systems, environments, and inherited traumas that shape substance use. Behaviour change can be supported by building capacity for responsibility, skill-building (especially land-based skills), and trust, recognizing youth are shaped by their environments and as key knowledge-holders.

Connecting youth to land, culture, and seasonal teachings is foundational. Land-based activities are not symbolic but practical, skill-based pathways to independence, healing, and identity. Medicine Wheel teachings, Grandfather Teachings, and land-based learning can shape both programming and research design, reflecting the diversity of Indigenous communities and the interconnected systems in which health promotion occurs.

Building and sustaining coalitions

Adapting coalition structures to align with local contexts and remaining flexible is key, underscoring that there is no one-size-fits-all model. Coalitions should reflect community size, geography, stage of implementation, and available resources. Some coalitions are volunteer led while others rely on paid coordinators. Structures range from single coalitions to layered models with sub-coalitions by community or action area.

Sustaining engagement, particularly early on, can be challenging because of the lag between coalition formation and survey results or action planning. Coalitions are more likely to stay energized when they feel valued and informed through regular communication, meaningful share backs (especially from youth), visible signs of progress, and expressions of appreciation. Meeting sparingly when there are no substantive updates, while providing consistent updates by other means and using meetings for learning and relationship-building, can help maintain momentum while respecting competing organizational priorities.

Meaningfully engaging specific groups, including youth, schools, parents, and Indigenous communities, can be difficult without intentional approaches. Youth want real decision-making power in spaces that feel accessible and relevant, while schools face capacity and burnout challenges despite their potential to legitimize the work. Engaging Indigenous partners requires time, trust, and resources, and may not centre on surveys or predefined models. Across all groups, meaningful involvement depends on respect, flexibility (e.g., choosing meetings times that work with youth schedules), and allowing communities to choose actions that reflect their priorities.

Leveraging existing relationships and shared ownership takes some pressure off limited capacity to implement actions. Paid roles are ideal, as purely volunteer-driven models are difficult to sustain. Engaging grandparents as community champions, creating sub-coalitions, and offering micro-grants can also support shared ownership.

Understanding emerging factors in youth substance use

Digital environments are dominant in youth culture. These include social media, online groups/friends, and AI-driven algorithms that amplify extremism, provide access to substances, gambling ads, and risky challenges. Gambling, gaming, and online sports advertising are rapidly rising influences, normalizing risk behaviours and reaching youth through sport viewing and digital platforms. Tech safeguards struggle to keep up, with youth savvy often outpacing restrictions and adults lacking digital literacy to monitor or guide effectively. Land-based and offline activities provide powerful buffers, helping youth disconnect from digital stressors and build healthier relationships.

Social isolation – exacerbated by COVID-19 – drives youth toward online identities, echo chambers, and comparisons that worsen mental health and increase substance use risk. On the other hand, protective factors centre on connection – belonging, supportive adults, mentors, peer-led messaging, and culturally grounded teachings.

Norms and stigma are powerful influences on youth substance use. Attitudes toward alcohol, cannabis, and nicotine are shaped by adults and peers, and are often reinforced through online visibility and family modelling. At the same time, hidden or stigmatized substance use persists, particularly among marginalized groups, 2SLGBTQI+ youth, and in rural communities, where heightened visibility and fear of judgment can intensify risk. Meanwhile, mental health conversations are increasingly normalized and mental health issues may be self-diagnosed, creating a tension between important efforts to reduce stigma and the potential for over-identification with diagnostic labels. Youth leadership is essential, as peers are more credible messengers and can challenge harmful norms (including adult substance norms).

Additional influences on youth substance use include school-related issues (e.g., feeling unsafe, disengagement, bullying), problems with sleep, and structural challenges (e.g., poverty, weak digital policies, shifting government funding priorities). Cultural and community contexts also matter, with unique risk and protective factors across racialized groups, rural settings, newcomers, and intergenerational trauma histories. Within these broader conditions, parents and other caring adults may find it harder to provide guidance and maintain strong connections with young people. Strengthening prevention efforts requires intentional support for caregivers. IPM implementers could consider initiatives that build stronger child–caregiver relationships, improve digital literacy, and increase understanding of how sleep affects mental health.