



Annual Report

2024-2025



project step

project step is a community-wide initiative that ensures young people and their families have access to **support, treatment, education, and prevention** of harms related to substance and technology use. *project step* partners deliver addictions counselling, prevention education, and family support in every publicly funded high school and in five community-based schools in Ottawa. The partnership also provides live-in treatment at two centres—one in each official language.

Addressing problematic substance and technology use challenges early is key. If we stop the cycle of addiction before it begins, we set kids on track for a healthy life with stable employment, housing, and social connections.



BECAUSE OF PROJECT STEP...

- Youth have ready access to substance use counselling in any of the publicly funded high schools in Ottawa, and in several community agencies focused on helping young people.
- Teachers and school staff receive presentations and workshops to help them identify youth experiencing challenges with substance use or addictions and connect those students with *project step*.
- Parents with children experiencing challenges with substance or technology use can access counselors to help them support their kids on the path to their success or recovery.
- Young people receive education on substance use health and mental health. They also receive information on how to support their peers and where they can turn to for help with their mental health, or if they are questioning their relationship with substances or technology.

SINCE 2007	17,700 +	students access school-based counselling
project step	289,000 +	students receive education sessions
HAS HELPED:	16,100 +	parents receive the support they need



2024-2025 PROGRAMMING

project step's school-based programming is delivered by [Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services](#), [Le CAP](#), and [Ottawa Catholic School Board counsellors](#).

Students at every public high school in Ottawa, including alternative schools, have access to substance use prevention and education programming, and counselling. Many intermediate and elementary schools (grades five through eight) also have access to education and prevention programming through *project step*.

School-based addictions counsellors also provide educational sessions, including teacher training and parent-focused events, related to mental health and substance use health.

project step also ensures substance use counselling services are available to youth who may not be engaged in the public school system, through three community agencies:

- [Youville Centre](#) provides young single mothers and expectant mothers with a full range of counselling and life skills supports.
- [Operation Come Home](#) provides mental health and substance use counselling to street-involved and at-risk youth.
- [Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health](#) provides culturally appropriate mental health and addictions programming for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children, youth, and families.

IMPACT

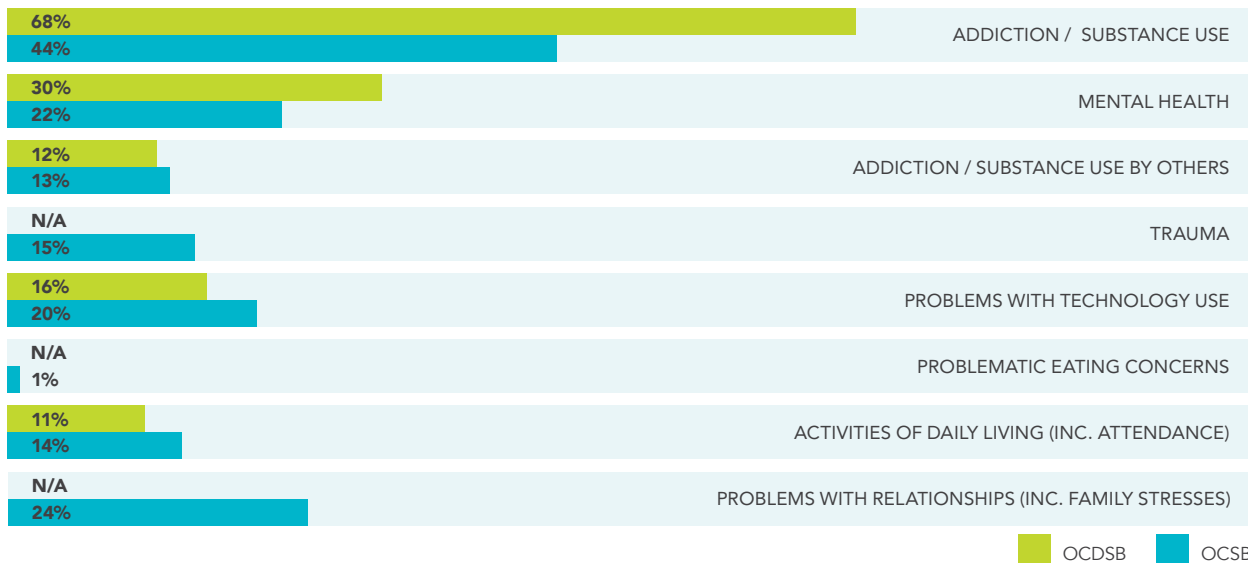
Data was collected during the school year, between September 2024 and August 2025. Some community programming carries over into the summer months. All data recognizes “youth” as students in grades nine to 12, unless otherwise specified.

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMING – OUTPUTS

SCHOOL YEAR	Youth engaged in counselling	Youth participating in prevention & education	Parents engaged in counselling	Parents participating in information sessions	School personnel attending training sessions
2007-13	5,000	20,000	1,900	110	N/A
2013-14	1,770	17,100	320	140	N/A
2014-15	1,330	15,500	260	200	N/A
2015-16	1,420	12,310	200	3,020	N/A
2016-17	1,460	14,100	220	2,420	N/A
2017-18 ¹	1,188	22,900 ²	250	1,044	N/A
2018-19	1,114	34,597 ³	172	2,171	88
2019-20	758	19,477 ⁴	233	1,364	234
2020-21	720	27,350 ⁵	183 ⁶	452	1,398
2021-22	771	13,850	51	232	504
2022-23	937	22,772	27 ⁷	962	737
2023-24	612	15,294	N/A	126	20
2024 -25	641	54,425	N/A	105	63
TOTAL	17,721	289,675	3,816	12,346	3,044

NOTE: there is a slight decline in counselling and information sessions from 2019/20, and again in 2020/21 because of school closures during the pandemic.

MOST COMMON PRESENTING ISSUES FOR REGISTERED CLIENTS



¹ The data provided for 2017/18 is incomplete due to reporting issues.

² Includes youth in grades 5-12

³ Includes youth in grades 5-12

⁴ Includes youth in grades 7-12

⁵ Includes youth in grades 4-12

⁶ In 2020/2021, data collection for parent counselling sessions changed. Participation numbers after this year are not equivalent to before the pandemic but are still reflected as outputs towards this effort.

⁷ This number is approximated for privacy reasons

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMING – OUTCOMES (OCSB ONLY)

IMPACT OF INTERVENTION ON STUDENT WELLBEING (N=95)	2023-24	2024-25
Relationship with family	63%	63%
Relationship with peers	78%	71%
School performance	44%	68%
General mental health	67%	79%
Moving towards goals	89%	71%
Learning about themselves	100%	98%
Technology usage	50%	59%
Substance usage	75%	80%
Gaming	60%	64%

N = the number of students who completed pre- and post-program surveys, a smaller subset of the total number of students who accessed the program.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMING – OUTPUTS

SERVICE DELIVERY PARTNER	INDIVIDUALS SERVED
Youville Centre	43
Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services	204
Operation Come Home	19
Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health	60
Le Cap	146
Total	472

COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMING – OUTCOMES

OUTCOMES	TOTAL
Clients reduce substance use	79%
Youth with improved mental health outcomes	74%
Youth with improved connections to family, friends and community	73%
Youth served who avoid or reduce risky behaviours	72%
Academic or employment success	88%
Client distress is reduced	72%
Clients achieve counselling goals	90%
Clients equipped with positive coping strategies	87%



COLLECTIVE IMPACT ACTIVITIES

APRIL 1, 2025 - MARCH 31, 2026

Hosted project step's Annual Stakeholders Meeting

On January 22, 2026, *project step* hosted its Annual Stakeholders Meeting, bringing together youth participants, public health partners, government stakeholders, four school boards, and community agencies to collectively explore the harms of problematic technology use. Four scenarios guided the group mapping activity and panel discussion: social media, online gambling, video games, and artificial intelligence (AI). Youth voices were at heart of this event. Youth engagement best practices ensured young people were included as equals and experts in intentional, meaningful ways.

Building on this multisectoral conversation, youth identified key strategies to prevent and address the harms of problematic technology, including:

- Strengthening the ecosystem of support surrounding youth
- Capacity-building for youth through education and long-term strategies
- Creating and enforcing regulations around emergent issues like AI and sports betting advertisements
- Fostering learning opportunities for prevention education, online safety, and digital and financial literacy
- Co-creating harm reduction strategies with youth
- Setting time and spending limits

Learn more in the [Summary Report](#).

Engaging Youth on Problematic Technology Use

project step put its *Youth Engagement Plan* (completed in May 2025) into action by engaging young people in meaningful discussions related to the harms of problematic technology use. Throughout 2025, *project step* met with two youth groups: the Ottawa Youth Council (OYC), through Youth Ottawa, and the SWAG (Students Will All Graduate) program, through Carlington Community Health Centre. Conversations focused on online safety, digital wellness, and the connection between mental health and technology. Similar themes emerged, building on existing knowledge related to problematic technology use and echoing the need for youth-driven solutions, harm reduction, third spaces, prevention education, peer-to-peer supports, and accountability beyond pointing the finger at youth to consider the role of parents, educators, government and other key players. These conversations directly informed the design and delivery of the Annual Stakeholders Meeting.

2023-2025 Achievements

In 2025, *project step* successfully concluded its three-year Goals and Milestones, informed by a 2022-2023 environmental scan conducted by Vivic Research and aligned with the five conditions of collective impact.

Six goals were identified:

1. Strengthen our common agenda
2. Review and renew a financial sustainability strategy
3. Develop a community engagement strategy
4. Improve shared metrics and processes and set a research agenda
5. Develop a shared harm reduction framework
6. Develop a systems-based communication and advocacy plan

The *project step* Cabinet serves as the initiative's leadership body and includes three standing committees and one ad hoc committee:

- Research, Evaluation, and Learning Committee
- Resource and Planning Committee
- STEP Coalition
- Ad Hoc Community Engagement Committee

Together, these accomplishments have strengthened system coordination and positioned *project step* for greater impact in the next phase of work.

From 2023-2025, *project step* committees achieved the following:

- Deepened community and youth engagement by hosting the Youth Adult Conversation on Mental Health and Substance Use Health, developing a Youth Engagement Plan, convening Annual Stakeholder Meetings, and advancing system alignment and meaningful community engagement.
- Enhanced communications and fundraising capacity through the development of key materials, including a Plan on a Page, annual reports, videos, one-pagers, and presentation decks, supporting resource development and increased investment in programs.
- Improved internal alignment and effectiveness through a process evaluation conducted by Carleton University students, adopting sharing harm reduction guidelines, implementing a shared online platform, and updating terms of reference. These efforts strengthened collaboration across partners to better support youth and families.
- Strengthened a shared understanding of impact by standardizing definitions and data collection practices, enabling more consistent, credible, and data-driven engagement with government and funders.



WHAT'S NEXT FOR PROJECT STEP STRENGTHENING THE COMMON AGENDA

Through interviews, surveys, and discussions across the *project step* network, a clear set of shared priorities emerged to guide the next phase of work.

Partners emphasized the importance of strengthening *project step's* unique role as Ottawa's only network focused on youth addictions, including substance and technology use, while avoiding duplication with broader mental health initiatives. There was strong alignment around advancing evidence-based approaches, increasing public awareness, reducing stigma, and building the network's collective expertise. Stakeholders also highlighted the need to invest in sustainable resources, strengthen system coordination and referral pathways, and deepen engagement with youth, families, schools, and equity-deserving communities.

Based on these insights, the following priority areas for 2025-2026 were approved in October 2025:

- Expand prevention
- Strengthen services
- Champion knowledge
- Strengthen partnerships

In the year ahead, committees will initiate research, partnerships, tools, and opportunities that support the network's shared priorities, while engaging youth with lived and living experience in meaningful ways.



HISTORY

In 2007, United Way East Ontario, together with the provincial health authority, the Ottawa Network for Education, Ottawa Public Health, four Ottawa school boards, and six community agencies launched *project step* to address the need for support, treatment, education, and prevention of substance use issues among youth in Ottawa.

Before *project step*, young people in need of substance use treatment had nowhere to go. Many were forced to leave home, incur costs, and they did not have access to follow-up support. With the leadership of *project step*, Ottawa now has two live-in substance use treatment programs for youth, one in each official language.

project step also delivers addictions counselling, prevention education, and family support in every publicly funded high school and in five community-based schools in Ottawa. This programming is delivered in partnership with the four school boards and five service delivery partners (Le CAP, Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services, Operation Come Home, Youville Centre, and Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health), and is funded by Ottawa Public Health, the four Ottawa school boards, and United Way East Ontario. *project step* is coordinated by the Ottawa Network for Education and United Way East Ontario.

project step is made possible through the partnership of these caring and committed organizations:

PROGRAM PARTNERS:



SERVICE DELIVERY PARTNERS:



We also thank the many community partners who have helped shape *project step*, including the Ottawa Police Service, Dave Smith Youth Treatment Centre, YouTurn, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre, and the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Together, we can change the trajectory of a young person's life—for the better.

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