

Working Together: Brief Conversations and Policy Enforcement

BACKGROUND

The way schools address vaping on their premises is changing. With the release of PPM 128, the Ontario Ministry of Education shared the vision of a “school code of conduct” that was implemented in September of 2024. The code of conduct prohibits the use, provision and possession of commercial tobacco, electronic cigarettes (vapes) and nicotine products on school property. At minimum, if students are found in possession of these substances, parents must be notified, and the student must surrender the item(s) to the educator or administrator. With this change in direction, school staff must uphold and enforce this code of conduct as well as ensure compliance with the Smoke Free Ontario Act (SFOA) on school property.

This guidance document provides suggestions to help school staff navigate this new policy direction while responding to youth who vape, with a focus on support, by using the [Brief Conversations](#) approach. By providing a supportive environment, schools can foster resilience and encourage students to seek help, ultimately promoting a more positive and productive learning atmosphere.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDANCE

Considerations:

- Youth may not be aware of the policy or law restricting products or use in various spaces.
- Youth may not be aware of the serious risks of using nicotine products and consider their use unimportant and/or harmless.
- Youth using products in restricted places may be doing so to address addiction, mental health or other personal challenges.
- Punishing students because they are addicted or experiencing other mental health or personal challenges may be counterintuitive. Offering support should be prioritized as it addresses the root causes of the behavior and helps students develop healthier coping mechanisms and strategies to reduce future use.

Policy Communication:

- **Set Clear Expectations:** Clearly communicate behavior expectations and consequences to help everyone understand what happens when policies are violated.
- **Share Information Widely:** Ensure students, parents, and the entire school community are informed. Use various channels such as school announcements, letters, the school website, social media, and in-school signage.

Create defined roles and expectations:

- To avoid confusion for students, some staff roles may need to focus only on enforcement and implementing consequences.
- Support and train all staff to provide **Brief Conversations**. Everyone should be equipped to **ASK** students about their vaping and **ACT** to connect them to resources and supports.

Intervention Tips:

- **Deal with the 'tough stuff' first:** Address enforcement actions and consequences before offering additional support or interventions.
- **Avoid judgement:** Acknowledge that the violation occurred and that the goal is to provide education and support to reduce this behaviour in the future.
- **Allow time for processing:** Understand that initial conversation may be challenging. If the student is upset, offer to revisit the conversation later. Giving them time helps prioritize their needs and builds rapport.
- **Separate conversation for support:** Discuss cessation, using the *Brief Conversations* approach, in a separate interaction or with different staff after the enforcement has taken place. This makes it easier for the student to enter the conversation with an open mind, not focused on consequences.
- **Avoid the "righting reflex":** The goal of *Brief Conversations* is to not fix or solve a problem or to offer advice. Provide information and support dependent on the student's willingness and readiness for change.

EXAMPLE SCENARIO:

VP: "Please come in and sit down. I just got a message that you were caught vaping in the bathroom a few minutes ago?"

Student: "Yeah, I didn't have time to make it outside between classes."

VP: "Have you heard the announcements that we have been making about not vaping in school and what the consequences are for students found doing this?"

Student: "Yes. I know I shouldn't have done it, but the need to do it kind of took over today. I'm most mad about my vape being taken away, to be honest. I just bought that one."

VP: "I can understand you being upset about that. Before we talk further, and if it's ok with you, I just want to take a moment to talk about the consequences for students found vaping at school. More importantly though, I hope we can spend most of our time discussing your needs and exploring supports. When you say things like "vaping kind of took over" I want to make sure that you are alright."

Student: "Okay, am I going to get a ticket too?"

VP: "Right now, we do have to confiscate your vape and notify your parents but because this is your first time, we won't be referring you for a ticket. How do you feel about that?"

Student: "Relieved I'm not getting a ticket, I heard it's over \$300! I'm still mad about my vape and my parents are probably going to freak out."

VP: *"Totally understandable. I can see that this is upsetting to you. Do you want to stop now to give you a chance to process this information? Maybe we can talk again when you're not as upset?"*

Student: *"Well, I'm mostly relieved that I'm not getting a ticket. What else did you want to talk about?"*

VP: *"When you say 'vaping kind of took over today', it sounds like you may be showing signs of addiction. What do you think about getting some help to quit?"*

...Brief Conversation continues focussing on the ACT step and arranging supports based on the student's readiness to quit.