

Co-designed strategies to improve responses to vaping amongst young people in Western Australian schools

This document is based on the findings of research conducted by the Tobacco Vape Research Collective, Collaboration for Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health, School of Population Health, Curtin University.

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Background

The use of electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes), commonly referred to as vapes and vaping, and its associated harms is a priority public health issue,(1) particularly among young Australians. Despite Australia's regulatory framework, young people have been readily accessing e-cigarettes, particularly disposables,(2, 3) which often contain high concentrations of nicotine, thereby contributing to physical and psychological harm and nicotine addiction.(1) The most recent national data, reported by the Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey 2022/2023(4) shows that almost one-third (30%) of Australian secondary school students aged 12-17 years have ever vaped. Those reporting vaping in the past month also significantly increased, compared to 2014 and 2017 (16% vs. 3% and 4%).(4) In response to these developments, and recognising the need for further regulatory measures as part of a comprehensive approach, in January 2024 the importation of single-use disposable vapes was prohibited, followed by the prohibition of refillable vapes from March 1, 2024.(5)

Research findings

Our Western Australian-based research(6, 7) aimed to understand the factors that may prevent or facilitate vaping among young people from the perspectives of school professionals, parents, and young people, and to co-design strategies to improve responses to vaping in school settings, delay first use, prevent the uptake of vaping and reduce nicotine addiction.

We spoke with 59 school professionals, parents and young people living in the Perth metropolitan area. We found that young people viewed vaping as a normalised and socially accepted behaviour. Most school professionals and parents reported a limited understanding of vaping and its associated harms. The management of vaping products challenged school professionals who were looking for government guidance on how to manage the issue.

In November 2023, we brought together key stakeholders, including health and education administrators, school professionals from independent and public schools, and parents, to review and discuss our research findings and deliberate on the importance and feasibility of strategies to improve responses to vaping among young people in schools. Individual reflection, small group discussions and group consensus-gathering were used in the half-day workshop to refine and prioritise the critical strategies contained in this document. The Health Promoting Schools Framework guided these strategies,(8) a Framework that recognises schools as communities that promote empowered, engaged, and healthy students who are connected to teachers, carers, parents, families, and local neighbourhoods.(9)

Considerations

The critical strategies listed within the Vaping Prevention Plan for Schools were ranked in order of importance by the workshop delegates and could ideally be prioritised in the order presented. However, it is recognised that schools operate differently and may be at various stages in their vaping management journey. Vaping product use is not solely an individual behaviour choice but is heavily influenced by both the social and physical environment. Implementing supportive vaping prevention measures within schools, rather than punitive measures is recommended.

Vaping Prevention Plan for Schools

1. Build the capacity of all school staff to engage in vaping education through professional learning

Vaping is the responsibility of all school staff and should not be considered the responsibility of some. Professional learning should provide information about trends in prevalence, vape products, chemical composition, health effects, influences on use, addiction, acquisition channels, legal status in Australia, and policies and programs to reduce e-cigarette use and support cessation.

2. Review, reform or develop school policy and/or procedures relating to vaping

Policy and procedural review, reform and/or development are likely to have the greatest impact when undertaken in collaboration with staff, students, and their families. Effective policies and procedures require regular review and should be communicated to the whole school community. School-based policies and procedures should relate to all areas of vaping (i.e., strategies for prevention and cessation, plus the sanctions that would be imposed if vaping on school grounds was discovered) and should align with relevant sector guidelines (i.e., Department of Education, Association of Independent Schools WA, or Catholic Education WA) and existing State and Federal laws.

3. Develop vaping-specific curriculum resources for students

It is important that schools deliver age-appropriate, evidence-based drug education reflective of effective pedagogies. This should be supported by creating and publishing quality-assured, curriculum-aligned resources for school staff to enable student learning that focuses on vaping facts.

4. Provide specialised professional learning opportunities for staff who work in student services or pastoral care roles

Student services teams play a key role in responding to vaping. Professional learning to upskill these staff in strategies to apply to their responses to vaping will contribute to effective support for student vaping behaviour change and cessation.

5. Foster supportive school social environments that normalise non-vaping

Schools should support healthy student behaviours by normalising non-vaping through the provision of educational resources (e.g., content experts integrated into curriculum development, professional development opportunities), prevention messaging through multiple channels (e.g., posters, social media, websites, newsletters, assemblies, incursion/excursion activities, pastoral care), positive non-vaping role modelling, and implementation of supportive vaping cessation strategies for students.

6. Encourage families and the community to consistently demonstrate an intolerance of vaping

Families and the members of the school community should be encouraged to support schools by reinforcing school messaging about the harms of vaping, role-modelling non-vaping behaviours and supporting school responses to vaping management.

7. Ensure all school staff are informed of the legal responsibilities relating to vaping

All school staff need information about the new Public Health (Tobacco and Other Products) Act and State-specific vaping regulations to enable understanding of what can be done regarding vaping management and to ensure staff are confident in implementing school-based vaping prevention strategies.

8. Provide all members of the school community with vaping information that mirrors teacher and student learning

Members of the school community (particularly parents, guardians, carers, and family members) should be provided with up-to-date accurate information about vaping from sources such as the Federal and State Governments, the Department of Education, and Independent Schools Associations to effectively support schools and positively influence student vaping behaviour. The provision of learning opportunities for the whole school community will contribute to a common understanding about vaping, acquisition of refusal skills and knowledge of available cessation supports, with information sharing to occur through multiple channels (e.g., posters, social media, websites, newsletters, assemblies, incursion/excursion activities, pastoral care).

9. Manage the physical environment within and around schools

Identification of vaping 'hot spots' will enable the mitigation and implementation of supportive strategies to discourage vaping and support vaping cessation, such as staff surveillance of identified vaping 'hot spots' and the incorporation of single cubicle toilets into school design and infrastructure.

Should schools choose to install vape detectors in bathrooms, consistent responses to detector alerts will be required to foster an expectation among students that vaping is not tolerated. This strategy will require adequate financial and personnel resourcing. Note: Vape detectors are not recognised as best practice and there is no empirical evidence to support their use.

Schools should consider how they will dispose of confiscated vaping products. Vapes are a hazardous waste item containing harmful chemicals in the e-liquid and a lithium-ion battery (which is a fire risk). Further information about the disposal of vapes can be found here: <https://recyclingnearyou.com.au/vapes>.

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