

Province to 'crack down' on cell phone use, vaping in schools

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The 2024-2025 school year will see stringent new rules across the Province when it comes to cell phone use and vaping within the educational environment.

On Sunday, Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced sweeping changes which will come into effect in September.

Students in Kindergarten through Grade 6 will be required to keep phones on silent and out of sight for the entire school day, unless 'explicitly permitted' by an educator. For older students up through Grade 12, there will be a slight relaxation of the policy, with the ban in force only within class time, unless otherwise permitted by a teacher.

'We have heard loud and clear from parents and teachers alike that cellphones in classrooms are distracting kids from learning,' said Minister Lecce in a statement. 'Our government is introducing the toughest policy in Canada to tackle this issue by cracking down on cellphone usage during class time, as well as banning vaping in all schools. When it comes to cellphones, our policy is 'out of sight and out of mind,' as we get students back to the basics by restoring focus, safety and common sense back in Ontario schools.'

The Minister also announced on Sunday that the Ministry would be 'strengthening' rules around students caught using ' and also carrying ' vapes or cigarettes. In these instances, students will be 'required to surrender these products, along with parents being notified immediately of the situation.'

\$30 million, the Government added, has been allocated within the 2024 Budget to install vape detectors and other security measures in schools.

'To support these initiatives, the Government is investing in \$17.5 million in new wrap-around supports for student mental health and parent engagement,' said the Province.

These measures and supports will include \$15 million to provide supports for students at risk of addictive behaviours; \$1 million to partner with School Mental Health Ontario to develop webinars and resources 'targeted to parents and students' across Ontario to 'learn how to talk about the adverse effects of vaping and excessive cellphone usage; and \$1.5 million to Parent Involvement Committees and students to run local prevention campaigns to 'deter' vaping and cellphone distractions.

'Our government is taking action to protect children and youth from the harmful risks of vaping and build healthier communities across the province,' said Minister of Health Sylvia Jones, who also serves as Ontario Deputy Premier and MPP for Dufferin-Caledon, in a statement. 'We are building on the changes we have already made to restrict the sale of flavoured vapour products by taking this next step to make students surrender vape, tobacco and nicotine products in student possession to ensure our children receive their education in a safe and healthy learning environment.' Added Dr. Kieran Moore, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health: 'Ontario is seeing a growing number of youth in Grades 7 through 12 report using vaping products that contain and emit many toxic substances. These products can affect the respiratory, immune and cardiovascular systems, and nicotine in these products is particularly harmful to youth brain development. Removing vaping products from Ontario schools will help protect our students from these preventable threats.'

Since the April 28 announcement, groups representing educators have expressed concerns about how they will be equipped to enforce the new rules.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), for instance, said during recent bargaining, they fought for improvements

that would address what they describe as "increasing violence and disruption in schools" and noted that some of the concerns they outlined to the Ministry were reflected in last week's announcement.

But, they added, measures to address violence are yet to be reflected.

"Despite our attempts to make improvements to school environments in a collaborative way with this government, ETFO was not given the opportunity to review the revisions before the Ford government released them," said the group in a statement. "This is extremely disappointing, but true to form for a government that has, for years, consistently disregarded input from its education partners."

Their recommendations included clear definitions when it comes to "unacceptable" student behaviour and the enforcement of consequences for non-compliance, defining such behaviours as including "bullying, cyberbullying, intimidation, harassment, racism, discriminatory behaviour, physical violence, sexual assault, shoving and pushing, profanity, disrespectful behaviour that shows disregard for a teacher's or other supervising adult's position, failing to follow directions, significant disruptions to the learning environment, misuse of technology and social media, and repeated use of tobacco or e-cigarettes.

"Education is a shared responsibility, and decisions affecting our schools should be made through transparent and inclusive processes that prioritize the well-being of students and the professionalism of educators," they said. "It is only through respectful dialogue and true collaboration that we can develop policies that reflect the diverse needs of our school communities and uphold the highest standards of education."

HAVE YOUR SAY ? Do you agree with the Province's decision to crack down on cell phone use and the use of vapes? Send your thoughts to brock@lpcmedia.ca.