

Vaping - An inquiry into reducing rates of e-cigarette use in Queensland

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Submission to Queensland Parliament

Inquiry Into Reducing Rates of E-Cigarette use in QLD

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1. Background and summary

Life Ed Queensland strongly supports the parliamentary inquiry to reduce e-cigarette use in Queensland. This submission relates to the following terms of reference of the inquiry:

1. *The current status in Queensland relating to the:*
 - a. *prevalence of e-cigarette use, particularly amongst children and young people;*
 - b. *risks of vaping harmful chemicals, including nicotine, to individuals, communities, and the health system; and*
 - c. *approaches being taken in Queensland schools and other settings relevant to children and young people to discourage uptake and use of e-cigarettes.*
2. *Opportunities to increase:*
 - a. *awareness of the harmful effects of e-cigarette use (with and without nicotine) to an individual's health, and the effectiveness of preventative activities; and*
 - b. *accessibility and effectiveness of services and programs to prevent uptake and continuing use of e-cigarettes.*

As the state's largest non-government provider of health and wellbeing education to primary school and preschool children, we are greatly concerned about the growing prevalence of vaping among young Queenslanders. Life Ed Queensland believes that urgent action is needed to educate children on the potential harms, as an important preventative measure. Without immediate action, we believe that vaping use will undermine the significant gains made over recent decades in reducing cigarette smoking.

This year, Life Ed Queensland will partner with approximately 800 schools and early learning centres, to support almost 10,000 classroom teachers and 190,000 children and their parents, with education programs that focus on the physical health and social-emotional wellbeing of young Queenslanders. Since 1987, more than 1.6 million Queenslanders have participated in the Life Ed program during their school years.

Working closely with primary schools and parents throughout Queensland, including metropolitan, regional and remote communities, provides Life Ed with a strong insight into the health and wellbeing issues that concern parents, schools and young people.

In this submission, we will share key insights from our surveys conducted during April 2023, gathering feedback from 630 parents, 193 classroom teachers and 477 students across Queensland regarding vaping. We hope this will assist the Queensland parliament in making decisions to address this growing problem which endangers the health of our next generation of young people.

2. Methodology

Life Ed QLD approached its network of students, teachers and parents and invited them to participate in targeted surveys to get a better understanding of how each group was being impacted by vaping.

- Classroom teachers who normally participate in the Life Ed Teacher Survey were invited to respond to questions about vaping
- A SMS and direct email campaign was sent to our parent database encouraging them to provide us with their concerns and insights about vaping
- Students who participated in the On the Case nicotine and tobacco module were invited to provide anonymous responses to the vaping survey. These surveys were conducted prior to the delivery of the session.

3. Prevalence of vaping

We gained insights from our clients and supporters in regards to their exposure to vaping in their community.

Our survey of 630 **parents** of school children in Queensland, revealed that:

- One in six Queensland parents knows a child under the age of 12 who vapes
- In the week prior to the survey, 50% of parents had seen someone they know vaping
- Parents who responded to the survey are very concerned about the impact of vaping on their children and its impacts in the school environment.

In our survey of 477 Queensland primary school **students** in Years 5 and 6:

- In the week prior to the survey, 45% had seen someone they know vaping
- Students are almost twice as likely to vape than they are to smoke cigarettes in the future.

In our survey of 193 classroom **teachers** across the state:

- There was widespread concern about the prevalence of vaping in schools and the impact on children's health and wellbeing
- Almost 50% of primary school teachers said there is some prevalence of vaping in their school community
- There was a feeling that many schools did not have a clear strategy to deal with the growing vaping issue.

4. Our recommendations

Life Ed supports the need for urgent strategies to reduce the supply of vapes and to limit the accessibility of vapes to those under the age of 18.

In addition, this submission focuses on demand reduction as a complementary and equally important strategy. Based on feedback we will share from parents, teachers and schools, we are proposing an urgent focus on school-based education programs to ensure that young people receive factual information on the risks of vaping from a credible and respected source, along with strategies and skills for refusal.

Due to the very rapid escalation of vaping use among Queensland young people, we recommend an urgent focus on:

- A Queensland-wide vaping education program, with a focus on upper primary school students, potentially extending to lower secondary school (Years 5-8) as an early intervention and demand reduction approach
- Engagement of health education providers who have strong partnerships with schools, who can deliver vaping education to students, alongside the classroom teacher
- Free delivery of vaping education to schools, via funding for providers so that programs can be quickly scaled up and delivered to ensure maximum reach, access and equity
- A whole of school approach, including parent engagement and education, and teacher professional development
- Support to teachers through online resources and activities.

5. Vaping education

Schools have the opportunity to select Life Ed's tobacco education modules for Year 5/6 students. However, demand for this has been declining. In part, this is due to the success achieved in reducing cigarette smoking among young people, to the point where it has become a lower priority. Instead, the majority of schools are increasingly prioritising Life Ed's social-emotional wellbeing programs, including those focused on respectful relationships, mental wellbeing and cyber safety. The demand for these programs is understandable, as they are extremely important and relevant to the needs of schools and young people today – arguably more so, since COVID-19. These must continue.

However, it should not be an either/or situation. We believe that schools should be incentivised to select vaping education, in addition to other health and wellbeing programs, so that all primary school children have the required knowledge and refusal strategies, before they enter high school. We believe that, at a time when we are experiencing a rapid and unprecedented escalation in vaping use, coupled with uncertainty in the community surrounding the short and long-term effects of vaping, schools should have access to free, factual vaping education, via specialist providers that they trust.

We need to act fast and decisively to stem the tide, through an investment in educating our young people on the potential harms of vaping, and supporting them with the knowledge, strategies and skills for refusal.

Whilst vaping is of greatest concern among secondary school students, we believe that early intervention is needed in upper primary school, before the age of initiation into vaping. Our student survey indicates that approximately 30% of Year 5/6 students may vape in the future, and that students who have recently seen others vaping are more than three times as likely to vape themselves. Our survey also revealed that students are twice as likely to vape than they are to smoke in the future. More than 20% of students are also unaware that there are harmful chemicals in vapes, with almost 30% unsure if vapes contain nicotine.

In this submission, we will share strong feedback from parents, teachers and students on the need for external providers to deliver vaping education in schools.

Classroom teachers have many responsibilities and are under increasing pressure post pandemic. Based on feedback, we believe that it is unreasonable to expect all classroom teachers to effectively deliver vaping education when there are myriad competing priorities in the classroom. We also believe that access to specialist providers should be free. An effective school-based response to the problem of vaping requires collaboration and partnership between parents, schools, government and external agencies.

As the major provider of health education in the primary school space, Life Ed has the capability and reach to scale up quickly to support a state-wide vaping education strategy. We have a strong infrastructure which includes 20 community-based specialist health educators. We have a track record of partnerships with approximately half of Queensland primary schools, and a database of almost 60,000 parents of primary school children.

6. Primary school students and vaping survey outcomes

During period 17 to 24 April 2023, Life Ed Queensland surveyed 477 Year 5 and 6 students. These surveys were conducted prior to the delivery of our drug education modules.

The students were from the following schools:

- Norfolk Village State School
- Ashmore State School
- St Francis Tannum Sands
- Bethania Lutheran Primary School
- Moore Park State School
- Warraburra State School

Vaping awareness among students was very high. Of students surveyed, 93.89% had heard of vaping, 4.42% had not heard of vaping and 1.68% were unsure.

The vast majority of students (91.91%) recognised that vaping is unsafe, with 1.28% believing it to be safe. 6.81% were unsure.

From the responses below, students were less certain about the harms of vaping compared to cigarettes. One in five students felt that vaping is less harmful, and one in seven students were unsure.

Table 1: Compared to cigarettes, do you think vaping is:

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More harmful	41.83%	197
Less harmful	20.17%	95
The same	24.42%	115
Not sure	13.59%	64
TOTAL		471

One in four students were unsure whether vapes contain nicotine. Overall, less than 70% agree that many vapes contain nicotine.

Table 2: Many vapes contain the drug nicotine:

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
True	69.92%	330
False	3.60%	17
Not sure	26.48%	1256
TOTAL		472

Almost one in five students were unsure whether vapes contain harmful chemicals.

Table 3: Vapes don't contain harmful chemicals

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
True	4.29%	20
False	78.11%	364
Not sure	17.60%	82
TOTAL		466

Regarding the prevalence of vaping and students' exposure to it, 45.26% of students said that they have seen someone they know vaping in the past week.

Table 4: In the past week, have you seen someone you know vaping?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	45.26%	215
No	54.74%	260
TOTAL		475

There was a noticeably higher likelihood of students intending to vape in the future than those intending to smoke cigarettes, with 14.08% indicating they may vape, compared to 7.86% who may smoke. A further 14% of students said it was unlikely but did not completely rule out smoking or vaping in the future. An additional 5% were unsure. This indicates that only two-thirds of students (66.52%) have no intention of vaping, with the other one-third having the potential to vape, which is of significant concern.

Table 5: Smoking or vaping in the future

	VERY LIKELY	MAYBE	NOT LIKELY	NOT AT ALL	NOT SURE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
How likely are you to smoke cigarettes in the future?	0.85% 4	7.01% 33	14.01% 66	73.04% 344	5.10% 24	471	3.75
How likely are you to vape in the future?	2.35% 11	11.73% 55	13.86% 65	66.52% 312	5.54% 26	469	3.61

When we analysed those students who had seen a person they know vaping in the past week, the likelihood of them vaping in the future was almost five times greater than for the students who had not seen someone vape in the last week. This indicates a strong correlation between the environment and the behaviour/influence of those around them, and the potential of students to vape.

Table 6: Exposure to vaping and intention to vape

How likely are you to vape in the future?	VERY LIKELY	MAYBE	NOT LIKELY	NOT AT ALL	NOT SURE
Children that responded 'No' to seeing someone vape in the last week	0.39%	5.12%	11.02%	80.31%	3.15%
Children that responded 'Yes' to seeing someone vape in the last week	4.69%	19.72%	17.37%	49.77%	8.45%

Children in regional communities appear to be at greater risk of vaping in the future, compared to students in metro areas.

Table 7: Regional vs Metro Queensland

How likely are you to vape in the future?	VERY LIKELY	MAYBE	NOT LIKELY	NOT AT ALL	NOT SURE
Regional students	7.14%	16.07%	11.61%	57.14%	8.04%
Metro students	0.36%	9.42%	14.13%	72.46%	3.62%

When asked what would stop young people from vaping, students were most strongly in favour of not being able to buy vapes, followed by health advertisements and school programs run by service providers such as Life Ed. Programs run in schools by teachers were seen as the least likely to stop people from vaping.

Table 8: In your opinion, what would stop young people from vaping?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
In school programs for kids run by teachers	14.04%	65
In school programs for kids run by other service providers like Life Ed	34.56%	160
Not being able to buy vapes	69.55%	322
Health advertisements for young people on social media/tv	38.88%	180
TOTAL		463

7. Classroom teachers and vaping survey outcomes

Between 17 and 27 April 2023, we surveyed almost 200 primary school teachers in Queensland from the following schools:

- Ashmore State School
- Ashwell State School
- Barkly Highway State School
- Bethania Lutheran School
- Bororen State School
- Chevallum State School
- Dimbulah State School
- Fernbrooke State School
- Gleneagle State School
- Goondi State School
- Norfolk Village State School
- North Eton State School
- North Lakes State College
- Oonoonba State School
- Park Lake State School
- Petrie Terrace State School
- Redland Bay State School
- St Anne's Catholic Primary school
- St Francis Catholic Primary School Tannum Sands
- St Joseph's Catholic School Mundingburra
- St Joseph's School Atherton
- Ipswich West State School
- John Paul College, Daisy Hill
- Jones Hill State School
- Kenmore State School
- Ma Ma Creek State School
- Mackay Central State School
- Mirani State School
- Miriam Vale State School
- Mooloolaba State School
- Mount Sylvia, Ma Ma Creek, Mount Whitestone
- St Kierans Catholic School
- St Patricks Primary School
- St Peter's Indooroopilly
- St Thomas of Villanova Parish School
- St. Joseph's Catholic Primary Biloela
- Sunnybank Hills State School
- Sunset State School
- Swayneville State School
- Thornlands State School
- Townview State School
- Woogaroo Creek State School

Teachers were asked about the prevalence of vaping in their school community. Almost half of teachers responded that there was some prevalence, with almost one in four believing it to be either moderate or a lot/a great deal. Many teachers told us they had dealt with vaping incidents. *"A lower school student had a vape at school which shocked me,"* said one teacher.

"Some students have brought vapes to school. Many parents are using them," revealed another.

Table 9: How prevalent is vaping in your school community?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
A great deal	2.59%	5
A lot	6.22%	12
A moderate amount	15.54%	30
A little	22.28%	43
None at all	53.37%	103
TOTAL		193

Less than one in ten teachers said that education on the health impacts of vaping was a current strategy within their school to discourage vaping use. Feedback from teachers as part of the survey response, suggests many schools are ill-equipped to deal with the challenges that vaping may present, with many school communities currently not undertaking any interventions. *“The vaping is happening after school and at the skate park and community centre,”* said one teacher surveyed. *“We have some parents either turning a blind eye or completely oblivious to what their children are doing.”*

Table 10: What approaches are being used in your school to discourage uptake and use of vaping?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
None of the above	51.19%	86
Communication with families	28.57%	48
Enforcing rules and protocols	32.74%	55
Additional teacher supervision of the playground during breaks	2.38%	4
Teachers leading education on the health impacts of vaping	8.93%	15
Incursions with external providers	3.57%	6
Other (please specify)	5.95%	10
TOTAL		168

Teachers responded that a whole of school/community approach is needed to combat the vaping problem with widespread support for in school programs for children delivered by external providers, as well as parent workshops and public health promotion campaigns.

Table 11: What additional interventions would support your school community to discourage vaping?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Parent workshops	53.85%	77
In school programs for kids run by external providers	43.36%	62
Teacher professional development	28.67%	41
Tougher penalties for retail outlets	29.37%	42
Public health promotion campaigns designed for young people	51.75%	74
Online teacher and parent resources	37.06%	53
Other (please specify)	5.59%	8
TOTAL		143

More than 90% of teachers believed that it would be beneficial for Life Ed to provide specialised vaping education as part of our core drug and alcohol program. *“Information is knowledge. The more information they have the better decisions they can make,”* said one teacher.

Table 12: How important would it be for Life Ed to provide additional age-appropriate vaping education to students?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Extremely useful	46.15%	78
Very useful	26.04%	44
Somewhat useful	19.53%	33
Not so useful	4.73%	8
Not at all useful	3.55%	6
TOTAL		169

8. Parents and vaping

Over a two-week period, Life Ed Queensland received more than 600 submissions from Queensland parents in regional and metro areas informing us of their experiences and awareness about vaping.

Of those surveyed, 1 in 6 parents said they know a young person under the age of 12 who uses vapes. As one parent wrote in their survey comments: *“I think school education is important in primary school, because my 11-year-old comes home and tells me he has a classmate who vapes at school.”*

Table 13: Do you know a young person under 12 who vapes?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	17%	79
No	74%	337
Unsure	9%	42
TOTAL		458

More than 90% of parents said they believe vaping is unsafe, a reflection of widespread community concern about the long-term impacts of vaping.

Table 14: Q Do you think vaping is?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Safe	2%	12
Unsafe	93%	593
Not Sure	5%	30
TOTAL		635

More than 40% parents we surveyed believe that vaping is more harmful than cigarettes, while 45% believe vaping is just as harmful as cigarettes.

Table 15: Compared to cigarettes, do you think vaping is?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More harmful	41%	272
Less harmful	7%	46
The same	45%	298
Not sure	7%	45
TOTAL		661

Half of the parents surveyed said they had seen someone they know vaping in the past week.

Table 16: In the past week have you seen someone you know vaping?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	50%	315
No	50%	315
TOTAL		630

With vaping a topical issue in the media, unsurprisingly, almost 50% of parents said they obtain information about vaping from mainstream news, websites and social media. Anecdotally, parents are reporting that children are getting information via social media encouraging the uptake of vaping.

Table 17: Where do you get your information about vaping?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Web/Social media	9%	89
The news	40%	396
Other families	16%	157
Kids	12%	125
School communication	11%	108
Others (please specify)	12%	125
TOTAL		1000

Almost 40% of parents cited peer pressure as the key driver behind young people vaping, which reflects research indicating young people whose friends vape are more likely to vape themselves. It emphasises the need for effective education programs to support children to make safe choices. More than 30% of parents said the current availability of vape devices was also a key driver.

Table 18: What do you think are the drivers behind young people vaping?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Peer pressure	38%	502
Price	18%	234
Availability	34%	440
Other	10%	133
TOTAL		1309

There was strong support for in school programs to educate children about the dangers and contents of vapes (26% of parents); 27% said tougher penalties for retail outlets are needed; and a quarter of parents are in favour of public health promotion campaigns designed for young people.

Table 19: What do you think would reduce the uptake of vaping in young people?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
In school programs for kids	26%	464
Parent workshops	9%	166
Tougher penalties for retail outlets	27%	475
Public health promotion campaigns designed for young people	25%	457
Online resources	10%	179
Other	3%	58
TOTAL		1799

9. Additional feedback

Our survey of Queensland parents, teachers and students reveals people have passionate views about the issue of vaping. Hundreds of comments that were submitted along with responses to survey questions, expressed concern about vaping's potential to harm the health of young people; the accessibility of vapes; their marketing appeal to youth and the fear that many young people will become addicted.

As one teacher said:

"I see it as a massive problem in schools. Children are too afraid to go to the toilet due to being intimidated by other students vaping in the toilets! This is unhealthy and a deprivation of their basic human rights!"

Another shared this response:

"Schools need to take a stronger approach to consequences when kids vape on school grounds. I have worked at a school where two primary school students were caught vaping in the toilets on two different occasions and no consequences were given and parents weren't called. Vapes were stolen from shop and police weren't called. Principals and Ed Qld need to bring back consequences."

Many parents expressed concern that there is a perception that vaping is not as dangerous as cigarettes.

"I think young people see it as 'cleaner', 'cooler' and more glamorous than cigarettes," said one parent.

Another parent said vaping on public transport was difficult to police:

"Kids at our local primary told me that high school kids vape on the bus on the way home and offer it to primary kids. How do they get away with that? No one seems to be able to address that as they are not in school, but how can the bus driver be responsible for addressing that?"

Another parent echoed the thoughts of many, that education on vaping harms is vitally needed.

"Just say 'no' doesn't work. Education has to address the reality that they do taste good, however that is masking the health dangers and the head-spin buzz doesn't last for long-term users."

Students told us they are exposed to vaping online and in everyday life.

"There are a lot of vaping TikToks," said one primary school student.

"There are a lot of teenagers vaping at the park near my house whenever me and my brothers play there," another revealed.

"Parents shouldn't leave their vapes around children," said another. *"My mum vapes and smokes, and it is like she runs on nicotine, so when she is stressed, she has a smoke and I don't like it."*

10. Summary

Life Ed Queensland applauds the Queensland parliamentary inquiry into reducing e-cigarette use. In summary, we recommend that, due to the very rapid escalation of vaping use among Queensland young people, there is an urgent need for:

- A Queensland-wide vaping education program, with a focus on upper primary school students, potentially extending to lower secondary school (Years 5-8) as an early intervention and demand reduction approach
- Engagement of health education providers who have strong partnerships with schools, who can deliver vaping education to students, alongside the classroom teacher
- Free delivery of vaping education to schools, via funding for providers so that programs can be quickly scaled up and delivered to ensure maximum reach, access and equity
- A whole of school approach, including parent engagement and education, and teacher professional development
- Support to teachers through online resources and activities.

As a partner to almost half of all Queensland primary schools, Life Ed QLD looks forward to contributing our people and resources to supporting a concerted and focused school-based education campaign aimed at preventing future use of vapes by young people, and the harms they cause.