

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

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**QUEENSLAND**  

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**TEACHERS' UNION**

## **Queensland Teachers' Union**

**Submission to  
Queensland Parliament's  
Health and Environment Committee 'Vaping'  
inquiry into reducing rates of e-cigarette use in  
Queensland.**

**May 2023**

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## Introduction

Established in 1889, the Queensland Teachers' Union of Employees (QTU) has chalked up more than 130 years of achievement in providing professional, industrial, and legal leadership to Queensland's state education and training sectors. In 2023, the QTU is the professional voice of more than 48,000 members, including teachers and school leaders delivering curriculum and quality programs of training and learning in Queensland schools, TAFE colleges, and Central Queensland University (CQU).

As a significant stakeholder in Queensland education, the QTU is committed to actively engaging in processes in which the voice of teachers ought to be heard. The QTU's submissions and participation in stakeholder consultation are informed through the Union's active membership, which includes more than 2,500 QTU Workplace Representatives as well as decision making forums like our QTU Executive, which consists of democratically elected members from across the state.

This QTU submission is made in the interests of Queensland's educators, both school leaders and teachers, who are employed in state schools, and the communities in which they live and work. The work of QTU members throughout the state provides safe and supportive learning environments for Queensland's school aged children.

This QTU submission represents positions and anecdotal evidence provided by QTU members, supported by QTU Executive, democratically elected rank and file QTU members and teachers/school leaders.

QTU members have supported the drafting of this submission by contributing insights into strategies and challenges schools have adopted/faced with the shift from traditional nicotine tobacco products (hence reduction) to e-cigarette/"vape" nicotine products. This submission has collated members' stories and experiences.

The Queensland Teachers' Union acknowledges the terms of reference of this inquiry. As this is a public health issue requiring a public health and legislative response and messaging, this submission will only focus on:

1. c) *approaches being taken in Queensland schools and other settings relevant to children and young people to discourage uptake and use of e-cigarettes; and*
2. b) *accessibility and effectiveness of services and programs to prevent uptake and continuing use of e-cigarettes.*

The Union thanks the Health and Environment Committee for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry and would welcome the opportunity to participate in further discussion.

## Terms of reference

*In undertaking the inquiry, the committee will consider:*

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.*
3. *Consideration of waste management and environmental impacts of e-cigarette products.*
4. *A jurisdictional analysis of other e-cigarette use inquiries, legislative frameworks, policies and preventative activities (including their effectiveness in reducing e-cigarette use).*

## Summary of recommendations

<p><b>The current status in Queensland relating to the :</b>  <b><i>c) approaches being taken in Queensland schools and other settings relevant to children and young people to discourage uptake and use of e-cigarettes</i></b></p>		
1	The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to recognise that vaping or e-cigarette use is a public health issue requiring a multi-government agency approach; teachers and school leaders are genuinely concerned with the wellbeing of students so would welcome more government action on addressing vaping and e-cigarette use right across the community, but cannot reasonably be held solely responsible for tackling such a broad public health issue.	7
2	The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to recognise the efforts made by school teachers and leaders and the challenges they face in preventing, educating and responding to the issue of e-cigarette use or "vaping" in schools.	7
<p><b>Opportunities to increase:</b>  <b>b) accessibility and effectiveness of services and programs to prevent uptake and continuing use of e-cigarettes.</b></p>		
3	The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to make human resources and funding available to schools who request access to physical deterrents such as vape detectors, and school officials to run this or other programs to prevent the uptake of e-cigarettes.	8
4	The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to adopt measures that ensure all Queenslanders are exposed to the important health messages and are aware of the deterrents to vaping.	8

## 1.0 The approaches being taken in Queensland schools and other settings relevant to children and young people to discourage uptake and use of e-cigarettes

The QTU asserts that teachers and school leaders manage a whole range of complex issues every day, and vaping is one of them. Expectations and consequences are made clear through each school's code of conduct. [Student disciplinary absences \(SDA\) data](#) for the period 2017-2021 shows a significant increase in SDAs related to substance misconduct (not specifically vaping), which coincides with the increased accessibility and marketing of vaping products. Data available for 2022 shows further increases. The major reason for SDAs remains physical misconduct, which is a major focus and cause of additional workload for teachers and school leaders (2021 SDA data, Department of Education)<sup>1</sup>.

Delivering the Australian Curriculum is at the core of what Queensland schools do. The health curriculum from P-10 provides solid foundations for healthy choices from the early years of schooling. For example, by the end of Year 2, students "explain why health information is important for making choices". They learn to "investigate a range of health messages and practices in their community and discuss their purposes".<sup>2</sup> This illustrates the opportunity broader community health messaging would provide. Additionally, some schools have explored or are exploring external programs for targeted intervention, impacting on financial and learning time not accounted for within budgets and planning. One program costs \$9 per student and is delivered during school time, a burden for schools who have not factored it into curriculum and budget planning as an emerging issue.

Queensland schools face a number of challenges in preventing and responding to the use of e-cigarettes and vaping, including the difficulty in detecting them, both visually and olfactorily. There is less residue evidence than traditional tobacco nicotine products and there are a range of designs and styles, including colours and flavours/scents, that limit visual and olfactory detection. Smoke detectors designed to detect traditional tobacco nicotine products are not sensitive enough to detect vapourised liquids (vapour) reliably. The vape detectors that are available are expensive, and are more likely to be effective in poor ventilation. Anecdotally, schools that have installed them in bathrooms report a significant decline in detected incidents, either a sign of reduced vaping in bathrooms or that methods of avoiding detection such as blowing down the toilet are being employed. They are therefore a deterrent to vaping in bathrooms.

One study, which included 129 students aged 15-21 so not differentiating between school and higher education students, found a range of exposure to others using e-cigarettes onsite

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education (2022) *School disciplinary absences by student demographics, 2017–21* <https://qed.qld.gov.au/our-publications/reports/statistics/Documents/sda-by-student-demographics.xlsx>

<sup>2</sup> QCAA Australian Curriculum in Queensland (ACiQ) v9.0 <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/p-10/aciq/version-9/learning-areas/p-10-health-and-physical-education>

at school or university. Locations included bathroom/locker room (63 respondents), outside (52 respondents), elsewhere inside (32) and classroom (26 respondents).<sup>3</sup> This confirms the aforementioned challenges of human detection and detection systems. The QTU opposes any suggestion of bag searches as would be ineffective since many vaping products are deliberately designed to mimic standard stationery items such as highlighters, pens and USB drives.

It is not uncommon for a student or a parent respond that “it’s not smoking” when schools enforce the code of conduct. In comparison to smoking, the level of public health messaging required is currently not available, and this makes a broader public health response necessary, rather than a direct onus on schools. Parents and carers play a critical role in influencing their children's behaviour, both in addressing the motivation for vaping and controlling the supply of vapes to their children. Therefore, parents/carers are in as much need of education about the dangers as their children are.

*Note: at the time of submission, the QTU is conducting a survey of members that has not yet concluded.*

**The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to recognise that vaping or e-cigarette use is a public health issue requiring a multi-government agency approach; teachers and school leaders are genuinely concerned with the wellbeing of students so would welcome more government action on addressing vaping and e-cigarette use right across the community, but cannot reasonably be held solely responsible for tackling such a broad public health issue.**

**The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to recognise the efforts the efforts made by school teachers and leaders and the challenges they face in preventing, educating and responding to the issue of e-cigarette use or ‘vaping’ in schools.**

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<sup>3</sup> Pettigrew S, Miller M, Santos JA, Raj TS, Brown K, Jones A. (2023) *E-cigarette attitudes and use in a sample of Australians aged 15–30 years*, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, Volume 47, Issue 2, 2023



## 2.0 Opportunities to increase accessibility and effectiveness of services and programs to prevent uptake and continuing use of e-cigarettes.

In this submission, the QTU has already identified some challenges faced in schools in relation to accessing services and programs in response to increased vaping. Supply and marketing, as well as public health, need to be the focus of prevention programs. The QTU acknowledges the federal government announcement made while this submission was being prepared, but more can be done to ensure retailers and parents/carers are not supplying vapes and e-cigarettes to children. More needs to be done to explore and understand children's motivation for taking up vaping. This is a critical part of social behavioural change, conjointly with education programs about the health dangers.

Vape detectors are reactive, not preventative, but can act as a deterrent to continued use of e-cigarettes in school bathrooms. Should this be considered, additional funding should be made available for all schools that wish to install these devices, as well provision of human resources to act as designated school officials, responding to the alarms when chemicals or sounds are detected. Schools currently exploring this physical deterrent have found that quotes of approximately \$16,000 for 10 detectors and an alerts dashboard are cost inhibitive, and they lack the appropriate available staff to respond to any incidents detected.

Access to targeted programs from external providers is inhibited by cost and time taken from core learning to schedule into existing school programs. Schools that wish to access these programs should be provided with targeted funding separate to existing school funding.

Public health messaging via media and social media platforms is necessary for all Queenslanders, as the misinformation and misunderstandings are widespread among the public, not just with students. Anecdotally, a number of schools have reported that students and parents have been quoted as saying "it's not smoking", "it's a reward", or "I haven't seen any ads telling me it's bad for me". This education and messaging is not solely the responsibility of schools but a broader public health issue. The QTU acknowledges and commends the federal government's announcement of \$63 million for the public health information campaign to discourage Australians from taking up smoking and vaping, and to encourage more people to quit.

**The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to adopt measures that ensure all Queenslanders are exposed to the important health messages and are aware of the deterrents to vaping.**

**The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to make human resources and funding available to schools that request access to physical deterrents such as vape detectors, and school officials to run this or other programs to prevent the uptake of e-cigarettes.**