

Nicotine-Free Schools: A Policy Guide for K-12

June 2025

The Vermont Department of Health encourages schools to adopt evidence-based prevention and treatment measures to address youth nicotine and tobacco use. Exposure to nicotine is harmful to the developing brain and is linked to depression, stress and anxiety. Additionally, nicotine use can alter attention span, impulse control and the ability to learn.

Over the past five years, nicotine levels have been increasing in many tobacco products, including vapes, making them more addictive. Emerging products, such as oral nicotine pouches, are appealing to curious youth and teens.

Schools play an important role in delivering education on the negative health impacts of nicotine use, while increasing the perception of harm and strengthening social norms. While the [Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2023](#) indicates 18% of high school students and 7% of middle school students used tobacco products in the past 30 days, most young people live substance free.

Punitive measures, such as suspension for violations and vape detector placement in schools, are not proven effective and do not support youth in ending their nicotine experimentation or dependency. Use the tools presented in this guide to foster a healthier learning environment for all teens.

If you need help accessing or understanding this information, email tobaccovt@vermont.gov

Strategies for Reducing Nicotine Use Among Youth

- Implement evidence-based prevention curricula, cessation supports, restorative practice policies and alternative to suspension programs. Refer to [Addressing Vaping and Nicotine Use in Vermont Schools](#), a Health Department resource.
- Evaluate and strengthen your school's current smoke- and vape-free policy. The Vermont statute restricts use of all tobacco products, including vapes on public school grounds and sponsored functions.
 - The [Vermont School Boards Association](#) has a model tobacco free policy for school boards to adopt that can include confiscation and appropriate referrals to law enforcement.
 - [The Alliance for a Healthier Generation](#) offers a policy toolkit.
- Post Health Department 8.5" x 11" smoke- and vape-free [signage](#), available at no cost, at key locations on school grounds.

- [Order](#) free My Life My Quit materials, informed by youth for youth, to educate students and parents/guardians around the harms of nicotine use.
- Promote free, confidential [My Life My Quit](#) teen treatment services available through the Health Department because no vape is safe.
- Provide evidence-based and standards-based nicotine prevention education to youth starting in elementary school. Access these free lessons, complete with teacher talking points, activities, worksheets and follow-up discussion guides:
 - Stanford University's [You and Me, Together Vape Free](#)
 - CATCH Global Foundation's [CATCH My Breath](#)
- Engage, educate and empower youth to create positive change in their school community by starting an [Our Voices Xposed](#) chapter. This statewide youth-led, adult-supported nicotine prevention and education initiative prepares middle and high school students for leadership and civics. OVX is possible through a partnership between the Health Department and Agency of Education.

Implement an Alternative to Suspension Program

Replace punitive measures, such as fines or suspension, for tobacco product or nicotine possession with restorative practices that educate and positively change student behaviors.

- [My Life My Quit](#): Parents/guardians, educators and the justice system can refer students to this evidence-based tobacco treatment program as an alternative to punishment. Trained coaches engage youth and support them every step of the way by text, online or phone.
- [INDEPTH](#): An interactive, evidence-based education program to help schools present students with healthier alternatives to substance use while teaching them about nicotine dependence.
- [Our Healthy Futures](#): An alternative-to-suspension curriculum geared for students who have been caught using nicotine products and for any student interested in trying to reduce or quit nicotine use.

Help Youth End Nicotine Dependence

- Refer youth who may be struggling with nicotine addiction to support that works:
 - [My Life My Quit](#)
 - [Ex Program](#)
 - [NOT For me](#)

- The school nurse who can support the student and refer to the student to their pediatrician or primary care provider.
- A parent/guardian.
- Implement a [N-O-T: Not on Tobacco](#) youth cessation program within your school. Inquire about funding to support this work by emailing tobaccovt@vermont.gov.
- Support students who have prescription nicotine replacement therapy, or NRT, medications for the treatment of moderate to severe nicotine dependence by storing these medications, which come in the form of gum, patch, lozenge, nasal spray and inhaler, as any other prescription medication, and provide students with access as needed.

Why Not Use Vape Detectors?

A vape detector is a device that looks like a smoke detector. These devices are placed where vaping is not permitted, such as in a school bathroom or locker room. The detector's alarm sounds when chemicals are present in the air, such as those produced by vaping devices, but problems exist.

Vape detectors are not supported by evidence or research to prevent or reduce youth vaping. Health Department funds cannot be used to purchase, install or maintain vape detectors.

- The use of vape detectors does not address the root cause of youth nicotine use or provide the needed support and resources for those struggling with nicotine dependency. ([source](#))
- The American Lung Association does not support vape detector placement in schools as a strategy to reduce vaping stating, "Teens should not be punished for being addicted to a product that was aggressively marketed to them on social media, through celebrities and with kid-friendly flavors." ([source](#))
- Vape detectors are expensive, costing between \$300 - \$1,000 each. There may be additional expenses such as installation, annual fees and costs associated with connecting to the internet. ([source](#))
- Vape detectors can be set off by other chemicals present in the air, such as body spray or hairspray.

According to the nationally recognized [Public Health Law Center](#), better tobacco and nicotine youth prevention investments include:

- Education and prevention programs, including use of evidence-based curriculum and youth engagement groups like OVX.
- Tailored treatment programs.
- Supportive school disciplinary practices.
- Parent education, including [Parent Up](#), a Health Department resource that offers materials for school distribution.
- Evidence-based policies that restrict youth access, such as tobacco products being in locked containers or behind the counter, which is required by law in Vermont.