

Cannabis information for Educators

As Ontario gets ready for the federal legalization of cannabis, educators may have questions about the steps Ontario is taking to protect children and youth, the impact legalization may have on schools, and what information and supports are available to parents/guardians and students. They may also be looking for resources that parents/guardians can use when talking about cannabis with their children.

Rules for minimum age

In December 2017, Ontario passed legislation that establishes rules for the lawful use, sale and distribution of recreational cannabis.

The new law sets a minimum age of 19 to use, buy, possess and cultivate cannabis in Ontario. This is the same as the minimum age for tobacco and alcohol sales.

Even though recreational cannabis will be legal for adults, 19 and older, it will still be prohibited in schools.

Current rules for Ontario schools

A positive school climate and a safe learning and teaching environment are essential for student success. Everyone has a role to play in promoting a positive school climate. All existing rules against recreational cannabis use remain in effect. For instance, suspension will still be considered for a student possessing cannabis depending on the results of the principal's investigation.

Student mental health and well-being are very important. While educators do not provide direct mental health and addictions services, they are in a unique position to recognize changes in behaviour. The Ministry of Education continues to work with the education sector to equip educators with the tools and knowledge they need to 1) identify potential child and youth mental health and addictions issues, and 2) intervene effectively.

Working to protect youth

The Ministry of Education is working collaboratively with community partners and other ministries across government to prevent and/or delay cannabis use among youth, promote healthy decision-making and ensure student safety. We are also working within the ministry to determine any changes to the curriculum and policies that may be needed. This work will include considering the possible development of new or a compilation of current resources on informed decision-making, substance use, addictions and related behaviours, and supports available for students and families.

Curriculum connections

The Ontario curriculum is designed to help all students acquire the skills and knowledge they need to succeed, based on a program of learning that is coherent, relevant and age-appropriate. It recognizes that, today and in the future, students need to be critically literate in order to synthesize information, make informed decisions, communicate effectively and thrive in an ever-changing global community.

Q: What do students currently learn about cannabis in school?

A: Cannabis is mentioned in several curricula including: Health and Physical Education and Canadian and World Studies – Law.

- Under the direction of school boards and principals, teachers plan units of study, develop a variety of teaching approaches, and select appropriate resources to address the curriculum expectations, taking into account the needs and abilities of their students.
- Ontario's updated 2015 Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum is focused on helping students develop the knowledge and skills they need to lead safe, healthy and productive lives.
 - ✦ The HPE curriculum covers substance use, addictions and related behaviours in a comprehensive, age-appropriate way. It contains comprehensive learning that aims to discourage and prevent drug use among young people.
 - ✦ The focus of learning is on understanding health concepts, making healthy choices and making connections for healthy living.
 - ✦ The curriculum helps students acquire the knowledge and skills they need to develop, maintain and enjoy healthy living as well as to solve problems, make decisions and set goals that are directly related to their personal health and well-being.
 - ✦ Student learning about cannabis and other illegal drugs occurs directly within the Healthy Living component of the HPE curriculum.
 - ✦ While learning about cannabis is specifically addressed in Grade 6, student learning about substance use, abuse and misuse is part of a continuum of learning that extends from Grades 1 to 12.

Q: Where can I learn more about what students are being taught about cannabis?

A: The Ministry of Education has developed [a series of resources for parents/guardians](#) that outlines what students are learning in the Health and Physical Education curriculum.

- The ministry website has [grade-by-grade information](#) about the HPE curriculum which includes an overview of how students learn about substance use, addictions and related behaviour, with a focus on developing the skills and knowledge to make healthy decisions.
- [A Parent's Guide to the Revised Health and Physical Education Curriculum, Grades 1 to 12](#)
- The [Grade 6 overview](#) and [Grades 9–12 overview](#) may be of particular interest.

Q: What impacts will legalization have on Ontario's curriculum?

A: Legalization would result in minor changes to the HPE curriculum.

- The Ministry of Education is monitoring developments to ensure we are ready for any changes that may be required.

Suspensions and expulsions

Q: Is possession of cannabis still a possible reason to suspend a student?

A: Yes.

- Possession of cannabis (except for medical purposes, if authorized by a health care practitioner such as a Physician or a Nurse Practitioner) will not be permitted while in schools or at school-related activities, even after legalization of recreational cannabis.
- Suspension will still be considered for a student possessing cannabis.
- Under a recent amendment to the *Education Act* that will come into force pending the federal legalization of recreational cannabis, suspension may be considered for a student under the influence or in possession of cannabis. Suspension will be required, and expulsion may be considered, if a student gives cannabis to a minor.
- Before suspending a student, the principal must consider the individual circumstances of that student and must specifically take into account mitigating and other factors.
- Where a principal believes a student has provided cannabis to a minor, the student must be suspended up to 20 school days, pending the principal's investigation, to determine whether to recommend to the board that the student be expelled. When determining the length of the suspension and whether to recommend the student for expulsion, the principal must consider the individual circumstances of that student and must specifically take into account mitigating and other factors.
- Revisions will be made to policy documents and supporting resources that deal with suspensions/expulsions to reflect amendments to the *Education Act*. These documents include, but are not limited to:
 - ✦ *Program/Policy Memorandum (PPM) 144 Bullying Prevention and Intervention*
 - ✦ *Program/Policy Memorandum (PPM) 145 Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour*
 - ✦ *Provincial Model for a Local Police/School Board Protocol*
 - ✦ *Reporting and Responding to Incidents: A Resource for Board Employees*
 - ✦ *Suspension and Expulsion: What Parents and Students Need to Know*

Q: What resources are available to principals and other board staff dealing with suspensions related to cannabis?

- *Supporting Bias-Free Progressive Discipline in Schools: A Resource Guide* outlines how system leaders should take mitigating and other factors into consideration at all points along the continuum of progressive discipline. This guide was developed in collaboration with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.
- *Reporting and Responding to Incidents: A Resource for Board Employees* outlines the responsibilities of all board staff in relation to incidents that could lead to suspension or expulsion. This resource will be updated to reflect amendments to the *Education Act*.

Q: Where can I learn more about the rules around suspensions?

- *Parents' Guide to the Ontario Code of Conduct* outlines expectations for behaviour for everyone in the school community, including teachers, students and administrators.
- *Suspension and Expulsion: What Parents and Students Need to Know* will be updated to reflect amendments to the *Education Act*.

Mental health and addictions

Q: We already have students who we know or suspect are dealing with substance use issues. How do we support them?

A: The ministry's resource, *Supporting Minds*, is a *K-12 guide* that provides educators with information on the early signs of mental health and addiction problems, along with strategies that can be used in the classroom to support students.

There is a chapter on "Substance Abuse Problems" that has evidence-based information, including "A Continuum of Warning Signs" and "Strategies for Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment for All Students." It also contains references with additional information.

Q: How can we support students in our schools to help reduce the likelihood that they could develop a substance use issue?

A: Work is underway in all school boards across the province and through *School Mental Health ASSIST* to promote student mental health, which can help reduce the likelihood of a student developing a substance use problem.

- For example, the work underway in "mentally healthy classrooms" to strengthen a student's self-esteem, coping skills and life skills, and to provide a supportive environment would help to reduce the risk of substance abuse.
- School Mental Health ASSIST has *modules on creating mentally healthy classrooms* available on their website.

More information

Cannabis and legalization:

- Ontario's safe and sensible approach to federal cannabis legalization, including legalization timeline www.ontario.ca/cannabis
- How the Ministry of Finance and LCBO are choosing future sites for Ontario Cannabis Store locations www.lcbocannabisupdates.com/
- Health effects of cannabis on the brain and body www.canada.ca/cannabis
- Laws and risks of impaired driving www.canada.ca/cannabis

Cannabis and Ontario's publicly funded schools:

- Curriculum information for [elementary](#) and [secondary](#) students
- Resources on safe and accepting schools, including progressive discipline and suspension/expulsions www.ontario.ca/safeschools

Resources for Parents/Guardians:

- [Cannabis: What Parents/Guardians and Caregivers Need to Know](#)
- [Cannabis Talk Kit: Know How to Talk to your Teen](#)
- [Talking to teens about drug use](#)
- Information from the Ministry of Education about the health and physical education curriculum, safe and accepting schools and more, [available in multiple languages](#).