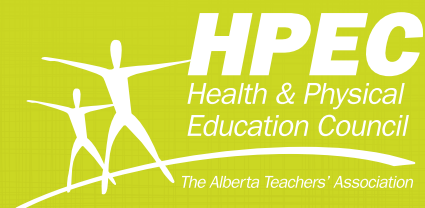


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# Activate



*The Journal of the Health and Physical Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association*



Inclusive Physical Education  
and Wellness

Unlocking the Potential of  
Physical Education

Traditional Indigenous  
Games

# The Impact of a School Vaping-Reduction Program on Students, Teachers and the School Community

Josie Sorensen and Ryan Fahey

This article demonstrates the importance of implementing wellness programs in schools—in this case, a vaping-reduction program.

Wellness programs are essential for creating a thriving school community in which both staff and students feel supported, motivated and appreciated.

A vaping-reduction program can not only educate students about the harmful effects of vaping but also empower them to make greater changes in the school and even the community.

Programs like this also provide opportunities for teachers (particularly new teachers) to grow professionally, collaborate and learn how to ask for support.

## Background

In fall 2023, I (Josie) was offered the role of health champion in our school. I'm a huge advocate for personal wellness and have always been an active person, so I said yes. This also allowed me to take on a lead role in the school as a newer teacher.

About a month into the school year, my principal asked me if I would also serve as the teacher representative for the Students Together Moving to Prevent Tobacco Use (STOMP) program our school had implemented the year prior.

I was hesitant to accept this responsibility. Between health championing, coaching, leading another wellness initiative in our division and, of course, teaching, I was already feeling overwhelmed. However, looking back on the amazing opportunities that came out of STOMP, for both my students and me, I'm so grateful I said yes.

## Getting Started with STOMP

An initiative of Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada), STOMP began as a multiyear (2021–24) pilot project that aimed to reduce Grades 7–12 students' commercial tobacco and vaping use through a comprehensive approach that considered students' unique characteristics, norms and needs.<sup>1</sup>

For the first step in my journey with STOMP, my principal connected me with one of the most supportive, enthusiastic and friendly people I have ever met—Ryan Fahey, the STOMP program lead. After our first virtual meeting, I felt reassured that I would not be alone in facilitating STOMP at our school.

I also learned that STOMP is so much more than just a vaping-reduction program. STOMP provides a step-by-step tool kit for schools that outlines everything from recruiting students to creating a tangible action plan to accessing evidence-informed resources through the STOMP hub.

## The Benefits of Implementing STOMP at Our School

In addition to educating students about the harmful effects of vaping, implementing STOMP at our school and establishing a STOMP Student Action Team promoted student leadership and facilitated networking with people in our community and across Canada.

### SIRCLE

Through STOMP, our students and staff were given the opportunity to collaborate with researchers at the University of Alberta's SIRCLE Research Lab.<sup>2</sup>



SIRCLE delivers and analyzes school-based programs throughout Canada that promote holistic health.

We participated in numerous focus groups, and our students were given the chance to act as co-researchers in a student-led arts-based research project. They loved getting a sneak peek into what research is all about and were excited to see their names on university-level research.

## Student Survey

An early initiative of our STOMP Student Action Team was surveying students to see what the vaping culture was like at our school.

Out of 188 responses, 32.4 per cent of students said they had vaped before, and 25.1 per cent of those students said they were introduced to vaping by peers.

These results were alarming, as they showed that the vaping prevalence in our school was higher than the national average of 30 per cent, as reported by Statistics Canada's 2022 Canadian Tobacco and Nicotine Survey.<sup>3</sup>

The survey also asked students why they vaped (or why they thought other students vaped). Responses included the following:

- Misinformation that vaping is safer than smoking
- Peer pressure to fit in and “look cool”
- Flavoured products that taste like candy
- Stress relief and coping with mental health issues

The survey also asked students how we could reduce vaping in our school. Many responses said that students needed more education and more discussion with their peers about the harmful effects of vaping. One student said, “Let the students use their voice to encourage other students to stop vaping.”

Our STOMP Student Action Team realized that to effectively reduce vaping at our school, we needed to let the information come from students themselves. While peer pressure can have negative effects on youth, it can also bring about positive effects (Coyle et al 2016).

## Research Contest

Based on our survey results and the STOMP approach, we decided to hold a contest open to all students at our school.

Students would research the harmful effects of vaping (as well as commercial tobacco use) and then create a slideshow presentation of their findings. The contest spanned March and April 2024 so that it would overlap with spring break, giving students more time to work on

their presentations. We advertised the contest through school announcements and posters. Students could work by themselves or in pairs. The top three presentations would win a cash prize (from our STOMP funds).

Wellness programs that use a whole-school approach foster feelings of connection and belonging. The contest not only engaged our entire student population but also allowed our school administration and staff to play crucial roles in supporting our vaping-reduction program.

Using the contest as a vehicle, teachers integrated vaping reduction into the curriculum. Many of our health and physical education teachers used the contest as a project in their classes. We also created a panel of teacher judges to anonymously evaluate the presentations, which was an effective way to get our staff involved in STOMP and help them learn more about vaping from the student perspective.

The support from our administration and staff enhanced student motivation and participation in the contest. The combined effort from staff and students helped ensure that the vaping-reduction message was impactful and that it spread to our wider community.

We received 33 submissions for the contest: 5 from Grade 12, 4 from Grade 11, 13 from Grade 10, and 11 from Grade 9. We shared the winning presentations with the whole school and planned to bring the presentations to our junior high feeder schools.

Many students commented that they enjoyed this contest because it allowed them to learn more about the harmful effects of vaping and commercial tobacco use while collaborating with their peers. Many asked us to hold the contest again the following school year.

After the contest, our STOMP Student Action Team reflected on how this peer-driven approach was more effective than a teacher-led approach would have been in both getting students to participate and making the vaping-reduction message resonate.

When students understand the risks of vaping, they become advocates for their own health and are able to help friends avoid or quit vaping. Wellness programs like this also help students lead and support their peers, building a healthier school environment.

## Other Impacts of STOMP

Implementing STOMP at our school had other impacts, including my professional growth, an award for one of my students and the creation of a student club to address larger issues related to student wellness.

## My Professional Growth

The STOMP program led to many professional development opportunities that have been great for my teaching career.

Ryan connected me with health-care professionals in Alberta and across Canada. I met with them virtually several times during the school year to share my experiences with STOMP and pick up tips and resources.

In May 2024, I had the amazing opportunity to present with Ryan at the PHE National Conference, in Saskatoon. In our session, we shared our successes in implementing STOMP. I also benefited from attending the other outstanding sessions and networking. As a new teacher, I felt listened to and supported by the experienced teachers I connected with.



*Ryan and Josie at the 2024 PHE National Conference*



*A slide from Josie and Ryan's presentation at the 2024 PHE National Conference*

## A Student Success Story

STOMP also led to one of my proudest moments as a teacher.

Through PHE Canada, I learned about Children First Canada's Future Is NOW! Awards, which celebrate young changemakers across Canada.<sup>4</sup> When Ryan sent me an e-mail about this award, I immediately thought of my student Brendan McFatridge.

Brendan was a member of our STOMP Student Action Team. He single-handedly raised over \$5,000 for our vaping-reduction program by reaching out to various businesses in our community and asking for their support. It was his hope that, with that money, we would continue the STOMP program after he graduated.

In March 2024, I nominated Brendan for a Future Is NOW! Award. In April, we found out that he had been selected as one of 10 outstanding young leaders and changemakers to receive the prestigious award.<sup>5</sup>

Brendan travelled to Toronto for a few days to meet with the other winners and nominees. During this experience, he also had the opportunity to meet people in his dream career (surgeon). Additionally, he was given a remote summer internship with Children First Canada, which allowed him to job shadow surgeons at the same time.

Brendan also appeared in the media to share his story of bravely standing up against bullying and discrimination in hockey and to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and inclusivity in sports.

STOMP and PHE Canada helped make this all possible.

## Sunshine Wellness Club

A big take-away from implementing STOMP at our school was the need to address larger issues related to student wellness, such as mental health and community.

In the 2024/25 school year, our students decided to use the foundation we had built through STOMP to create a student well-being group called the Sunshine Wellness Club.

This club focuses on student wellness through building a sense of belonging and community among students. This is achieved through emphasizing positivity and inclusivity, as well as encouraging students to pursue personal goals and growth.

The club also fosters students' leadership and social skills by having them create and lead their own clubs, such as clubs devoted to books, art and yoga, as well as study groups and university prep.

I am so proud of how my students have grown in their self-confidence and leadership skills through STOMP and our new Sunshine Wellness Club.

# How Wellness Programs Can Benefit New Teachers

New teachers may find themselves saying yes to everything and taking on more than they can handle. Coaching, running student clubs, serving on committees—it's easy to keep piling things on their plate.

I hesitated to say yes to becoming involved with STOMP, but I'm glad I did. In addition to the many positive impacts already discussed, STOMP mitigated the burnout and hopelessness I had been feeling the year prior.

One of the biggest lessons I have learned as a new teacher is the importance of putting your ego aside and admitting when you need help. Asking for support can help prevent burnout and help teachers feel fulfilled while also creating a sense of belonging among staff (Nygaard 2019).

Moreover, feeling supported and feeling like they are making a difference in their students' lives can lessen teachers' desire to leave the profession (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2011).

With support and advice from my amazing colleagues, as well as from PHE Canada, I have learned so much in my first few years of teaching and have been blessed to have had so many fulfilling experiences and opportunities. I am grateful to work with such wonderful teachers and to teach such outstanding students.

## Conclusion

My hope is that this article inspires teachers (especially new teachers) to say yes to implementing wellness programs like STOMP in their school.

Implementing wellness programs in schools is an investment in the success of both staff and students and can create long-lasting impacts in the school community. STOMP has brought about opportunities for both my students and me; fostered positive relationships in our school community; and shifted the culture in our school toward prioritizing well-being, empathy, collective responsibility and being proactive. Moreover, focusing together on a target issue (vaping reduction) promoted a sense of belonging and achievement. This was all incredibly rewarding and helped me see how gratifying the profession of teaching truly is.

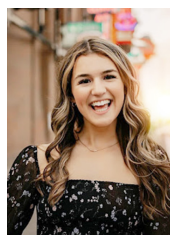
If you are interested in learning more about STOMP or similar supports, please contact me at [josie.sorensen@eics.ab.ca](mailto:josie.sorensen@eics.ab.ca).

## Notes

1. For more information about STOMP, see <https://phecanada.ca/teaching-tools/stomp>.
2. For more information about SIRCLE, see <https://katestorey.com>.
3. See [www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SVpl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=5305](http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SVpl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=5305).
4. For more information about the Future Is NOW! Awards, see <https://childrenfirstcanada.org/the-future-is-now-awards/>.
5. See <https://childrenfirstcanada.org/award-winner/brendan-mcfatridge/>.

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*Ryan Fahey, BA, BEd, CPT, is a programs and resources lead with PHE Canada. He is passionate about wellness, physical education and healthy schools, as well as the intersections between health, education, play and innovation. He has worked provincially, nationally and internationally in various roles in education. Recently, he led PHE Canada's STOMP program and now leads the mobilization of its Blueprint for Action in schools. He is also an established author in the personal growth and well-being space.*





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