



Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) Environmental Scan

Resources for Smartphone Use and Vaping/Substance Use Among Youth

Background and Purpose

Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada) was approached by the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) in the summer of 2025 to conduct an environmental scan of existing resources and supports available which address smartphone use and vaping/substance use among youth. This environmental scan was conducted in the fall of 2025 in response to supporting the OCDSB with identifying helpful resources and supports for sharing within their networks.

With respect to vaping and substance misuse, OCDSB shared the results of both high school student focus groups and parent/caregiver focus groups with PHE Canada that were conducted during the first and second quarter of the 2025/2026 academic year. The purpose of these focus groups were to gain an understanding of the experiences, concerns and needs of youth currently in the OCDSB community related to substance use and vaping, and to obtain a better understanding of parent/caregiver knowledge, concerns and needs related to vaping and substance misuse by students.

From the focus groups, the following recommendations were made to inform the development of various knowledge products and resources strategy to support students and parents/caregivers:

- Increase parents' awareness of community support and school-based supports.
- Spread awareness and education about substances through experts.
- Incorporate more education and awareness of substance use in classes and schools.
- Develop resources for parents that offer insights into the substance use landscape at schools, incorporate local data on substance use, and clearly explain the board's or school's approach/plan for addressing substance use.

The first phase of the strategy was to conduct an environmental scan. The following scan generates a list of resources for vaping and substance use, as well as smartphone use in schools. The focus was on identifying resources available in the Ottawa area, or developed by Ottawa-based groups, with a secondary approach of identifying national and international resources and research that may be applicable to these areas.



About Physical and Health Education Canada

Established in 1933, PHE Canada is a national charitable association and Canada's recognized leader in physical and health education. Physical and Health Education Canada (PHE Canada) empowers the PHE Community with quality programs, professional development services, and community activations to ensure equitable access to the benefits of quality physical and health education and healthy learning environments. By promoting and advancing quality physical and health education and healthy learning environments, PHE Canada aims to ensure each and every child and youth in Canada has the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to lead resilient, active, and healthy lives.

About The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) is the largest school board in Eastern Ontario, serving approximately 77,000 students throughout the 2,760 square kilometers of the nation's capital, Ottawa.

Commitment to Well-being:

Both organizations are committed to enhancing the well-being of children and youth in schools, with a key focus on action and partnerships to support safe and healthy schools, mental health and student and staff wellness.

Resources For Youth Vaping and Substance Use:

Resource	Intended Audiences	Resource Type	Why It Matters for Parents/Caregivers & Schools
School Health Online (OPH) – presentations, guides, activities, multimedia	Teachers, educators, school staff	Educational platform / curriculum resources	Supports schools in delivering consistent, evidence-based education on substance use and mental health.
School Health Online – health topic resource lists	Teachers, educators, school staff	Curated resource database	Helps schools quickly access reliable materials to support student learning and prevention efforts.
Youth Education Modules (tobacco, vaping, cannabis, Smoke-Free Ontario Act)	Students, educators, schools	E-learning modules	Provides prevention education and an alternative to disciplinary action, promoting learning over punishment.



OPH website – quitting smoking, mental health & substance use supports	General public, parents/caregivers, youth, schools	Support resources & service directory	Gives families and schools access to help services and tools for prevention, treatment, and support.
Tip Sheet: “Have THAT talk” about substance use	Parents, caregivers	Tip sheet / conversation guide	Helps caregivers confidently discuss substance use with youth, strengthening communication and prevention.
Vaping Factsheet	Parents, caregivers, youth, educators	Fact sheet	Provides clear, factual information about vaping risks to support informed decision-making.
Tips to lower risk when using nicotine (foldout & postcard)	Youth, parents/caregivers, educators	Harm reduction materials	Supports safer choices and reduces harm for those already using nicotine.
Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Tips	Youth, parents/caregivers, educators	Harm reduction guide	Educates on minimizing risks associated with cannabis use.
Vaping posters (e.g., brain development, inhalation risks, school consequences)	Students, schools, multilingual communities	Awareness posters	Reinforces key health messages visually in schools and communities; accessible in multiple languages.
Resource: What Happens If I Vape on School Property?	Students, educators, parents, caregivers	Poster / awareness resource	Clearly communicates school-related consequences of vaping, helping reinforce policies and support prevention conversations at home and in schools.
Resource: Are You Trying to Reduce or Quit?	Students, youth, parents, caregivers, educators	Poster / support resource	Encourages help-seeking behaviour and provides messaging around quitting, supporting both school interventions and family conversations.
Parenting in Ottawa – early warning signs & “Have THAT talk” series	Parents, caregivers	Website / guidance resources	Helps parents and caregivers recognize early signs of substance use and take action early.



OPH Mental Health & Substance Use Health Dashboard	Schools, policymakers, public health professionals	Data dashboard	Provides local data to inform school policies, programming, and targeted interventions.
OPH Substance Use Health page (general substance info + e-courses) Stop Overdose in Ottawa	Parents/caregivers, youth, educators, general public	Educational content & e-learning	Builds foundational knowledge about substances, stigma, and prevention strategies. This page also has print resources available for most of the substances, stigma and gambling.
OPH Mental Health and Substance Use Services and Resources	Parents, caregivers, educators, youth, general public	Resource hub / service directory	Connects families and schools to local supports, making it easier to access help for substance use and mental health concerns.

Note: Many of these resources are available in multiple languages including Arabic, Somali, simplified Chinese and Spanish

From PHE Canada and Partner Organizations

Vaping and Substance Use Resources for Parents and Caregivers:

Resource	Intended Audiences	Resource Type	Why It Matters for Parents/Caregivers & Schools
What's In a Vape	Parents, caregivers, youth, educators	Infographic	Visually breaks down vape contents, helping both youth and adults understand health risks quickly and clearly.
What We Know and Don't Know About Vaping	Youth, parents/caregivers, educators, administrators	Podcast/audio discussion	Provides balanced, expert-informed insights to support informed conversations and decision-making.
Substance Use Key Messages for Youth and Schools	Youth, educators, administrators	Educational Materials	Offers consistent, evidence-based messaging to support prevention education in school settings.



Substance Use Key Messages for Parents and Caregivers	Parents/caregivers, multilingual communities	Educational Materials	Helps caregivers communicate clearly and consistently about substance use with youth.
Vaping Cost One Teen His Health and Dreams	Parents, caregivers, youth, educators	Video	Uses a real-life story to highlight consequences, making risks more relatable and impactful.
The Impact of a School Vaping-Reduction Program on Students, Teachers and the School Community	Parents/caregivers, educators, administrators	Research Article	Provides evidence on effective school-based interventions, supporting informed program decisions.
Cannabis and Vaping Videos	Youth, parents/caregivers, educators, administrators	Videos	Engages audiences with accessible content to increase awareness and understanding of risks.
Substance Use Conversations with Youth: Tips for Adult Allies – A Communication Guide	Parents/caregivers, educators, administrators, multilingual communities	Guidebook	Equips adults with practical strategies to have supportive, non-judgmental conversations with youth.
Vaping Fact Sheet for Parents	Parents and Caregivers	Fact Sheet	Offers concise, parent-friendly information to understand vaping and support youth prevention.
Consider The Consequences Videos	Youth, parents/caregivers, educators, administrators, multilingual communities	Videos	Reinforces decision-making skills and awareness of consequences related to substance use.
The River Parable	Parents/caregivers, educators, administrators	Educational Video	Illustrates upstream prevention, helping schools and families focus on root causes rather than just outcomes.



Blueprint for Action Resource Hub	Policymakers, administrators, educators	Website Resources	Provides comprehensive tools and supports for promoting mental health and substance use prevention.
General Resources from Anchoring Change	Parents/caregivers, educators, administrators, policymakers	Website Resources	Provides comprehensive tools and supports for promoting mental health and substance use prevention.

Upcoming Conferences and Learning Events in Ottawa

OCDSB Parent Conference	Ottawa, April 18th, 2026
OCDSB STOMP Professional Development Day	Ottawa, April 27th, 2026
Ottawa Model for Smoking Cessation Conference	Ottawa, January 2027 (Annual event)

Resources Related to Smartphone Use in Schools:

Resource	Intended Audiences	Resource Type	Why It Matters for Parents/Caregivers & Schools
School Implementation Guide for Educators	Educators, school leaders	Implementation guide	Provides practical steps for schools to introduce and manage phone-use policies effectively.
Canada Policy Comparison Map	Educators, policymakers, administrators	Interactive policy tool	Helps schools and decision-makers understand how different regions approach phone policies.
Navigating Phone Use in Schools – What We Heard	Educators, policymakers, community stakeholders	Report / summary	Shares stakeholder perspectives, helping schools make informed, community-responsive decisions.
The Dais – Phone Free Schools Campaign	Schools, educators, parents	Campaign / advocacy resources	Supports schools and families advocating for healthier phone-use environments.



Unplugged Canada Resources and Information	Parents, educators, youth	Resource hub / advocacy organization	Promotes reduced screen time and provides tools to support digital well-being.
Video: Evidence on Smartphone Bans (Pete Etchells) Bath Spa University	Educators, parents, policymakers	Educational lecture video	Provides research-based insights to inform decisions about phone bans in schools.
Video: Teens Feeling More Pressure	Parents, educators, general public	News video	Highlights youth stress and burnout, helping adults understand broader well-being impacts.
Video: How Apps Use Design Tricks to Hook You	Youth, parents, educators	Explainer video	Builds awareness of persuasive technology, supporting healthier digital habits.
Research: Problematic Smartphone Use & Mental Health	Researchers, educators, policymakers	Systematic review / meta-analysis	Provides strong evidence linking phone use to mental health outcomes in youth.
Research: Cell Phone Restrictions in Ontario Schools	Educators, policymakers	Research paper	Examines impacts of school phone policies, supporting evidence-informed decisions.
Research: Social Media Use in Children & Adolescents	Educators, parents, researchers	Scoping review	Outlines risks of social media, informing prevention and guidance strategies.
Research: SMART Schools Study (Lancet)	Educators, policymakers, researchers	Observational study	Links school phone policies with student wellbeing and behavior outcomes.
Article: School Cell Phone Bans & Restrictions	Educators, policymakers, parents	Policy analysis article	Explains pros/cons of bans, helping stakeholders weigh options.
Article: What the Science Says – Smartphones in Schools	Educators, parents	Research summary article	Translates research into practical insights for school and home decision-making.
Article: The Case for Phone-Free Schools	Educators, parents, policymakers	Opinion / analysis article	Presents arguments for reducing phone use to improve student focus and



			wellbeing.
Article: LGBTQ+ Misrepresentation on Social Media	Parents, educators	Personal narrative / article	Highlights social media impacts on identity and inclusion, supporting more informed guidance.
Article: Banning Cellphones – Quick Fix or False Hope?	Educators, policymakers	Expert commentary	Encourages critical thinking about whether bans alone are effective solutions.
Podcast: Cell Phones in Schools – Is Banning the Answer?	Educators, parents, policymakers	Podcast episode	Explores different viewpoints, supporting nuanced discussions.
Podcast: Rethinking Smartphone Bans in Schools	Educators, policymakers	Podcast episode	Challenges assumptions and promotes balanced approaches to policy.
Podcast: Harvard EdCast	Educators, parents, policymakers	Podcast series	Provides ongoing expert insights on education and technology topics.
Center for Digital Thriving – Design Tricks	Educators, parents, youth	Educational resource	Explains how tech design influences behavior, supporting digital literacy.
Center for Digital Thriving – Thinking Traps	Educators, parents, youth	Educational resource	Helps users recognize cognitive biases shaped by digital environments.
Thinking Traps 1-pager	Educators, parents, youth	Handout / summary	Quick-reference tool for teaching critical thinking about digital content.
Tech Check Interview Guide	Educators, parents	Conversation guide	Supports meaningful discussions with youth about smartphone/digital media use and habits.
Information on Grind Culture Among Youth	Educators, parents	Educational article/resource	Raises awareness of performance pressure linked to digital environments and social media.

[Unicef Resources for Parents and Caregivers](#)Parents and
CaregiversEducational
resourcesSupports meaningful
discussions with youth about
smartphone/digital media use
and habits.

How Resources Support OCDSB Implementation Needs

The resources shared throughout this environmental scan are important in informing implementation of vaping and substance use policies as well as policies around smartphone use in schools across the OCDSB, in alignment with current Ministerial guidelines for schools around these two areas.

Summary

For vaping use, relevant resources and information for schools and youth exist, but more needs to be developed for parents and caregivers to close knowledge and misinformation gaps that exist around use of commercial tobacco, cannabis and vaping products. More podcast discussions, infographics, webinars, videos and resources as well as consistent key messages for parents would be welcomed in helping parents and caregivers understand the health impacts of these products and how to help their youth manage risks and decisions involving substance use.

Research surrounding smartphone use in schools and its impact on mental health/well-being outcomes as well as academic outcomes is mixed at this time, with increasing evidence pointing towards policies restricting smartphone use in schools being an effective strategy to support learning and well-being outcomes. Highlighted in much of the current research includes considerations for other factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, etc. which can play a role in whether or not smartphone use becomes problematic or not. For example, in rural areas, smartphone connectivity can be shown to have prosocial benefits and contribute to a sense of belonging, whereas in more urban centers, it can be overutilized and negatively impact social relationships. While more evidence is still emerging in this space, it is important to note that targeted approaches must be used when addressing smartphone use in schools, with youth themselves being engaged in the process or action(s). It is also important to note that school districts and ministries are recommended to identify what the specific problem is prior to implementing or mandating policies around smartphone use in schools to ensure maximum impact of those policies while supporting well-being. For example, is the problem a decrease in academic outcomes as a result of smartphones in schools? Is cyber bullying an issue? Social-emotional development? School connectedness? Well-being? Without a clear problem to address, policy can feel misdirected and unclear for parents, caregivers and youth themselves, which can lead to a lack of clarity for schools as they create policies around enforcement and restrictions surrounding smartphones in schools.

For vaping use, relevant resources and information for schools and youth exist, but more needs to be developed for parents and caregivers to close knowledge and misinformation gaps that exist around



use of commercial tobacco, cannabis and vaping products. More podcast discussions, webinars and resources as well as consistent key messages for parents would be welcomed in helping parents and caregivers understand the health impacts of these products.

Gaps and Opportunities

For vaping in schools, gaps still exist around misinformation about what is in vape products and their health effects on school-aged youth. More research needs to be published showcasing the long-term impacts of vaping use to help schools navigate more specific policy decisions and tailored professional development opportunities. Additionally, gaps exist in teachers, parents and caregivers' understanding around what chemicals are found within vape products, the harms associated with vaping use, and how vaping impacts student learning and overall well-being. Gaps also exist for parents and caregivers around what school-based supports exist. Examples can include in school peer support initiatives, STOMP student wellness team initiatives, mental health programming, in school knowledge fair events, etc. There also needs to be more awareness about accessible resources for families to turn to if they are navigating challenging substance use conversations in the home. Town halls and/or presentations for parents and caregivers about this topic are also an opportunity to further explore, which PHE Canada supported with workshops at the spring 2026 OCDSB parent and family conference event.

As noted in our summary section above, gaps also exist around key messages for parents and caregivers which PHE Canada is taking the opportunity to address through the creation of key messages for parents and caregivers when talking about substance use with youth. This is noted above in the knowledge products table as well. Another opportunity is for school districts to leverage existing resource hubs such as the PHE Canada STOMP Hub and Blueprint for Action Resource Hub; both identified in this scan, as well as the newly launched Anchoring Change Resource Hub focused on the new Substance Use Standards for schools across Canada. These resources are critical in guiding conversations, decisions and action related to addressing vaping and commercial tobacco use in schools.

For smartphone use in schools, more research is needed to construct concrete evidence that smartphone use is detrimental to student mental health/wellbeing and learning in schools. More resources such as podcasts, infographics, policy briefs, or videos around smartphone use in schools are needed for parents, caregivers, administrators and teachers. There also needs to be clear messaging readily available for schools that delineates between when smartphone use becomes problematic and why. Parents and caregivers also need clear evidence so they are well-informed about smartphone use and its effects on their child/children. There also needs to be a conscious effort for targeted approaches based on the needs of the school community rather than universal approaches to addressing smartphone use in schools, leaning on existing school data to inform priority areas and decisions. Finally, gaps exist in connecting problematic smartphone use to additional social and environmental pressures such as a “grind culture” that many youths are facing, which many youths describe as always needing to be “plugged in” and “productive” so they don’t fall behind their peers socially, professionally and academically.



An emerging opportunity is to continue surfacing high-quality evidence specific to smartphone use in schools and to continue learning about and adopting wise practices being implemented in school districts across Canada. Another opportunity would be to convene youth themselves for a series of discussions about what smartphone use means to them and how smartphones in schools contribute or detract from their well-being and learning and to continue monitoring smartphone school [policies across Canada](#).

Next Steps

Some emerging next steps for schools as well as parents and caregivers are noted below, based on the results of this environmental scan.

Audience	Area	Action	Why It Matters
Schools	Staff knowledge & capacity	Provide more professional learning on vaping (contents, health impacts, learning effects) and smartphone use (healthy vs. problematic use)	Ensures schools as well as parents and caregivers can confidently address misinformation and support student well-being, healthy decision-making
Schools	Student & family education	Integrate evidence-based education, host assemblies, knowledge fairs, and awareness campaigns	Reduces misinformation and promotes informed decision-making among students and families
Schools	Communication with families	Share information about school supports and host parent/caregiver sessions or town halls	Increases awareness and engagement with available supports
Schools	Resource utilization	Leverage STOMP Hub, Blueprint for Action Resources, and Anchoring Change Resource Hub	Aligns school efforts with national standards, evidence and best practices
Schools	Use Data-informed approaches	Use school/board data to guide targeted interventions instead of universal approaches	Ensures strategies are relevant and effective for specific school communities
Schools	Student voice	Engage students through focus groups, councils, or discussions around interventions, activities and/or policies	Helps ensure policies and approaches reflect real student experiences



Schools	Address broader influences	Incorporate discussions on social pressures like “grind culture” within classroom learning	Addresses root causes of behaviours, not just symptoms
Schools	Policy monitoring	Stay updated on emerging research and policies and adapt accordingly	Keeps school approaches current and evidence-informed
Parents & Caregivers	Knowledge building	Learn more about vaping contents/risks and smartphone impacts on health and learning	Supports informed decision-making and guidance at home
Parents & Caregivers	Ongoing Communication	Use clear, consistent messaging and conversation guides with youth	Encourages open, effective dialogue about sensitive topics such as substance use and vaping
Parents & Caregivers	Ongoing conversations	Have regular discussions about substance use and technology/digital habits	Builds trust and supports early intervention while preserving protective factors
Parents & Caregivers	Access local supports	Explore school-based and community resources for mental health and substance use	Ensures families know where to seek help when needed
Parents & Caregivers	Learning and Engagement	Attend workshops, town halls, conferences and school events	Strengthens connection with schools and awareness of relevant issues
Parents & Caregivers	Role modelling	Model healthy screen habits and encourage balanced routines	Reinforces positive behaviours in youth
Parents & Caregivers	Understanding pressures	Recognize impacts of social media and “grind culture” for youth	Helps parents and caregivers better support youth mental health
Parents & Caregivers	Staying informed	Seek credible, up-to-date information on vaping and smartphone use	Ensures guidance and discussion are based on current evidence



This environment scan was undertaken by PHE Canada, in collaboration with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board.