

May 15, 2019

**To: Superintendents of Public Schools, Independent School Authorities  
and First Nations Schools**

**Re: A Public Health Approach to Non-Medical Cannabis**

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Schools and the health system have a shared interest in helping students stay safe, healthy and protected from harm. In this letter we would like to outline a comprehensive public health approach for schools across northern BC with respect to the legalization of cannabis.

Cannabis is the second most widely used psychoactive substance in Canada. National and international evidence suggests that prohibition of cannabis has not achieved the intended objectives of reducing use and associated harms, and that legalization with strict regulation would be more effective.<sup>1</sup> Dried cannabis, cannabis oils and seeds were legalized in Canada on October 17, 2018.

Northern Health Medical Health Officers support a public health approach to cannabis access and use<sup>2,3</sup> including legalization with an appropriate level of market regulation aimed at protecting and promoting health, by allowing access to regulated products for adults while restricting access by youth. Some expected benefits of legalization and reduction of black market cannabis include safer products with known potency, advertising control, reduced stigma, reduced enforcement costs, and potential for reduced use by youth. To date, in jurisdictions where cannabis has been legalized, use has not increased.

### **What does cannabis legalization mean for youth?**

For youth under the age of 19 in British Columbia, it will be illegal to grow, possess, buy, sell, or share cannabis.<sup>4</sup> Strict rules will also be in place for impaired driving among youth.

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<sup>1</sup> Haden, M. Emerson, B. (2014). "A vision for cannabis regulation: a public health approach based on lessons learned from the regulation of tobacco and alcohol." *Open Medicine* 8(2) e73. Available online:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4085088/>

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Public Health Association's position statement on *Legalization, Regulation, and Restriction on Access to Cannabis*. Available online: <https://www.cpha.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/policy/positionstatements/cannabis-positionstatement-e.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Chief Medical Health Officers and Urban Public Health Network. (2016). *Public health perspectives on cannabis policy and regulation*. Available online: <http://uphn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Chief-MOH-UPHN-Cannabis-Perspectives-Final-Sept-26-2016.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> BC Government: Get cannabis clarity. Available online: <https://cannabis.gov.bc.ca/>

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## Why do young people use cannabis?

Young people use cannabis for many reasons. They might use it to help them feel good and to be sociable, experience things as more exciting or see things in a different way. Youth might also use cannabis to relieve stress, avoid feeling left out if everyone else is using it, to cope with problems or trauma they have experienced in their lives. Being open to discussion will help to know why a youth is using cannabis or what they think about it.<sup>5,6</sup>

## How widespread is cannabis use by youth?

A youth might tell you that everyone is using and so it is no big deal. According to the 2013 Adolescent Health Survey 26% of youth in BC have used cannabis, meaning about 74% of youth had not. In the north that number is slightly higher with 35% of youth having tried cannabis.<sup>7</sup>

Among youth in northern BC who have already tried cannabis, 66% first used it at age 14 or younger. This percentage is also higher than the provincial average 59%.<sup>7</sup>

That said, cannabis use among youth has historically been on a downward trend in BC, including in the north. In 2008 in northern BC, 39% of youth had tried cannabis, and 73% of those individuals had done so at age 14 or younger, higher than the rates reported in 2013.<sup>7</sup>

## Vaping and cannabis

E-cigarettes or “vapes” are electronic devices that heat a vaping liquid and form an aerosol that is inhaled. The vaping liquid typically contains propylene glycol and glycerol as well as other chemicals, substances and often nicotine. Cannabis oils or other THC extracts, can also be “vaped”.

The use of these products is on the rise. About one quarter of youth in Canada are using vaping products and have the perception that they are a harmless alternative to smoking cigarettes.<sup>8</sup> They may be less harmful but they are not harmless, and they may be more addictive to youth than we may suspect. When cannabis is vaped it does not produce the recognizable smell of smoking cannabis through a joint, blunt or pipe. This

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<sup>5</sup> Canadian Center on Substance Use (September 2016). *Guide to Facilitate Discussions about Youth Cannabis Use in Your Community*. Available online: <http://ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSA-Community-Discussions-Youth-Cannabis-Guide-2016-en.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada (2018). Preventing Problematic Substance Use in Youth. Available online: <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/corporate/publications/chief-public-health-officer-reports-state-public-health-canada/2018-preventing-problematic-substance-use-youth/2018-preventing-problematic-substance-use-youth.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> McCreary Centre Society, 2014. 2013 Adolescent Health Survey. Available online: [https://www.mcs.bc.ca/2013\\_AHS\\_Reports](https://www.mcs.bc.ca/2013_AHS_Reports)

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drug Survey 2016-2017. Available on-line: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/canadian-student-tobacco-alcohol-drugs-survey/2016-2017-summary.html>

allows youth to use these products without others knowing that they are consuming cannabis.<sup>9</sup>

**Recommendations for schools to promote a public health approach to substance use, in the context of cannabis legalization:**

- Curriculum for substance use prevention in schools should include drug literacy, and develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making, the core components of Social Emotional Learning.<sup>10</sup>
- The education provided should be delivered in a culturally safe, non-judgemental way with factual information presented with open dialogue and an interactive format. The teaching should be grounded in a harm reduction philosophy that includes delaying onset for those who have not used substances, as well as informing about the risks associated and ways to reduce the risk of those harms for those who are already using substances.
- Ensure a clear pathway to health care is identified so all students and staff know what to do if someone needs support relating to substance use. Each community is unique and accessing your schools Primary Care Nurse or Integrated Primary and Community Care team can be a good place to start.
- Smoking or vaping on or near schools (by staff, students or the public) remains illegal. Ensure the language in your smoke free grounds policies reflect the use of cannabis, tobacco, products that are vaped and other combustibles.
- Ensure workplace wellness policies require employees to be fit for work and require them not to be impaired due to substance use while at work, while at the same time not penalizing employees for disclosure of, or help-seeking for, a substance use problem. Workplace wellness policies should outline ways employees can access mental health and substance use services for themselves or respond to a colleague with a substance use concern.

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<sup>9</sup> Cannabis Talk Kit, Know how to talk to your teen. Second edition (2018). Available on-line: [https://www.drugfreekidscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Cannabis-Talk-Kit\\_EN.pdf](https://www.drugfreekidscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Cannabis-Talk-Kit_EN.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) 2019. Social and Emotional Learning: Available on-line: <https://casel.org/what-is-SEL/>

Thank you for your attention to this information. We encourage schools to follow a public health approach to cannabis legalization to promote health and safety for youth across northern BC. If you have any questions, please contact your local school Primary Care Nurse or your Integrated Primary and Community Care team.

Sincerely,



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## **Resources on cannabis and substance use prevention in the school setting:**

### **About Cannabis:**

- Government of Canada. (2017) [Health Effects of Cannabis](#)

### **About Vaping:**

- Government of Canada (2018) [Talking with your teen about vaping](#)

### **Guiding Framework:**

- Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. (2010) [Canadian Standards for School-based Youth Substance Abuse Prevention](#). Portfolio of practice standards highlighting best practice for youth substance prevention in communities, schools and families.

### **Curriculum Resources:**

- Canadian Students for Sensible Drug Policy. (2018) [Sensible Cannabis Education: A Toolkit for Educating Youth](#). Guiding principles for cannabis education (non-judgmental, open dialogue and interactive approach), pull away curriculum including drug education, harm reduction, potential health harms.
- Healthy Schools BC (accessed online) [Substance Use Prevention Tools](#) is a collection of youth substance prevention tools being used across the province.
- Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research/University of Victoria. (2018) [iMinds](#) is information and curriculum that helps students develop awareness of themselves, their relationships and their environment. Drug education curriculum and resources built for high school aged youth iMinds is based on a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. It does not require teachers to be experts on drugs or mental health. Instead, teachers serve as facilitators who explore ideas and issues along with their students.

### **Resources to Share with Students:**

- Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth. (2018) [The Blunt Truth - Useful tips about safer ways to use cannabis](#)

### **Resources to Share with Parents:**

- Drug Free Kids Canada. (December 2018) [Cannabis Talk Kit, Know How To Talk With Your Teen 2nd Edition](#)  
To order free printed copies follow this link: [Cannabis Talk Kit](#)