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# School smoking policies and student use of tobacco, e-cigarettes and cannabis

School Health & Wellbeing Research Brief, November 2016

Schools have played an important role in preventing young people from taking up smoking and adolescent smoking rates have substantially declined in the last 30 years. Smoking prevention activity within schools, however, has been accompanied by wide-ranging national policies to 'denormalize' smoking, such as smoke-free legislation. Have these changes in wider society made school smoking policies redundant?

## What we already know...

Written policies targeting the social environment are commonly used by schools to establish their ethos and expectations around tobacco use.

Early research in Wales found that school smoking policies were associated with a lower likelihood of daily or weekly smoking among students, but more recent studies indicate that this association may have weakened over time.

Smoking often occurs with use of other substances such as cannabis or e-cigarettes, but legislation addressing these substances has not been as consistent as that addressing tobacco use.



## What we did...

- We used data from the 2013/14 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey in Wales and its accompanying school environment questionnaire.
- Students in years 7 to 11 answered questions on their use of cigarettes, e-cigarettes and cannabis.
- Schools provided information on their smoking policies. The strength of their policy was classified as **weak** (no written policy), **moderate** (a written policy in place but it did not apply to everyone in all locations) or **strong** (a written policy in place and it applied to everyone in all locations).
- Schools also stated which year groups received tobacco, drug and alcohol education and whether they offered tobacco cessation initiatives.
- We investigated whether the strength of schools' smoking policies was related to students' use of tobacco, e-cigarettes and cannabis.
- A total of 7,376 students from 67 schools took part.

## In a nutshell

- Schools varied in the strength of their smoking policies, with 39% having a strong policy and 17% no policy at all.
- Having a moderate or strong smoking policy was not associated with student tobacco use.
- Stronger smoking policies were associated with lower levels of recent cannabis use.
- More comprehensive substance use education was associated with increased cannabis use in Year 11.



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## What we found...

### The school environment

- **39%** of schools had a strong smoking policy, **44%** had a moderate policy and **17%** a weak policy.
- **55%** of schools provided smoking cessation initiatives and **65%** delivered alcohol, tobacco and drug use education to all year groups.

### Student behaviours

- **5%** of students reported that they currently smoked, **11.5%** that they had ever used an e-cigarette and **3%** that they had used cannabis in the last month.
- All these behaviours were more prevalent in year 11 students: 11% currently smoked, 20% had used an e-cigarette and 7% had recently used cannabis.
- Cannabis use among year 11 students was highly clustered within particular schools.

### Smoking policies and substance use

- There was no association between the strength of school smoking policies and the proportion of students who currently smoked or had used an e-cigarette.

- Students in all year groups were less likely to have used cannabis in the last month if their school had a moderate strength policy.
- Cannabis use was also less prevalent in year 11 students where schools had moderate or strong smoking policies.

### Tobacco cessation, education and substance use

- Providing tobacco cessation initiatives was not associated with tobacco, e-cigarette or cannabis use.
- Providing tobacco, alcohol and drug use education across a greater number of school years was associated with an *increased* likelihood of cannabis use.



## Issues to consider

This study included a large number of young people who are representative of children in Wales as a whole.

Students reported their own use of substances, but we do not know if their answers were accurate.

School enforcement of smoking policies was not measured.

The relationship between cannabis use and more comprehensive substance use education might reflect 'reverse causality', whereby schools that recognise a problem with student cannabis use increase education in response.

The Welsh HBSC was funded by Welsh Government.

## What does this mean for my school?

- **Wider society increasingly sees not smoking as the norm, particularly in spaces where children are present. School policies banning smoking on or near school grounds may therefore make less of a difference to young people's perceptions of smoking as normal than they once did.**
- **Despite the apparently declining effect of school smoking policies on tobacco use, schools should continue to implement these policies due to their potential effects on other substances, such as cannabis.**

Read the research paper in full. Download for free here:

<http://eurpub.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2016/07/15/eurpub.ckw093>

Hallingberg B et al (2016) Do stronger school smoking policies make a difference? Analysis of the health behaviour in school-aged children survey. *European Journal of Public Health* doi: 10.1093/eurpub/ckw093