

**Submission  
No 31**

## **E-CIGARETTE REGULATION AND COMPLIANCE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Life Education NSW

**Date Received:** 3 November 2023



# Submission to NSW Parliament

## Inquiry into E-cigarette regulation and compliance in NSW

November 2023

**LIFE ED NSW | ABN: 59 053 737 045**  
**10 Hewitt Street, Colyton NSW 2760**

Key Contact:  
Jonathon Peatfield  
Chief Executive Officer, Life Ed NSW  
Ph: [REDACTED]  
Email: [REDACTED]

[www.lifeed.org.au](http://www.lifeed.org.au)

# 1. Executive Summary

Life Ed NSW strongly supports the parliamentary inquiry into e-cigarette use in NSW.

This submission relates to the following key issues:

1. *The prevalence of e-cigarette use, particularly amongst children and young people;*
2. *The risks of vaping harmful chemicals, including nicotine, to individuals, communities, and the health system; and*
3. *Feedback collated from parents, teachers and students that articulate and inform the reality of the situation at a school and community level.*
4. *The opportunity to improve early education in Primary and Secondary schools.*

Opportunities:

1. *An increase in education and awareness of the harmful effects of e-cigarette use (with and without nicotine) to an individual's health, and the effectiveness of preventative initiatives;*
2. *Greater accessibility to effective services and education programs to prevent the uptake and continuing use of e-cigarettes in Primary and Secondary school*
3. *Increased support for teachers and schools so that they are supported to cover additional vaping content in a crowded curriculum.*

As the state's largest non-government provider of health and wellbeing education to primary school and preschool children, we are greatly concerned about the growing prevalence of vaping among young NSW students. Life Ed NSW believes that urgent action is needed to educate children on the potential harms, as an important preventative measure. Without immediate action, we believe that vaping use will undermine the significant gains made over recent decades in reducing cigarette smoking. Through the Life Ed Secondary school program 'Reality Now', 13,000 students have been surveyed providing critical insights:

*Secondary Students:*

- *vastly overestimate their peers' usage of vapes'*
- *25% feel 'very or fairly concerned' about peer pressure to vape*
- *72% think their school has a 'serious or moderate' problem with vapes*
- *need immediate support to stem the year-on-year uptick in vape usage*

This year, Life Ed NSW will partner with approximately 2,600 schools and early learning centres, to support almost 14,000 teachers and 265,000 children and their parents with education programs that focus on the physical health and social-emotional wellbeing of young NSW kids. Since 1979, more than 7 million Australians have participated in the Life Ed program during their school years.

Working closely with primary schools and parents throughout NSW, including metropolitan, regional and remote communities, provides Life Ed with a strong insight into the health and wellbeing issues that concern parents, schools and young people.

In this submission, we will share key insights from our surveys conducted in Primary and Secondary schools since 2020, gathering feedback from parents, classroom teachers and students across NSW, QLD and SA regarding vaping. We hope this will assist the NSW parliament in making decisions to address this growing problem which endangers the health of our next generation of young people.

## 2. Background

Vaping is unsafe and potentially dangerous. While the long-term health effects are unclear, we do know that vaping in the short term has been associated with nausea, vomiting, mouth and airway irritation, chest pain and heart palpitations. There is a common misconception that vaping is merely harmless water vapour, this is inaccurate, it's an aerosol made up of toxic particles.

These aerosols contain and emit many harmful compounds, including:

- Formaldehyde and acrolein, which can cause irreversible lung damage
- Propylene glycol, which is toxic to human cells
- Nicotine, which is highly addictive and can harm the still-developing adolescent brain, particularly in areas that control attention, learning, mood and behavioural control.

In 2022, the Australian National University released a review of the international evidence on the harms of vaping. The health harms associated with vaping include:

- Nicotine addiction
- Intentional and unintentional poisoning
- Acute nicotine toxicity causing seizures
- Burns and injuries
- Lung injury
- Indoor air pollution
- Environmental waste and fires
- Dual use with cigarette smoking – increasing exposure to harmful toxins.

Additionally, vaping is associated with the uptake of cigarette smoking and can be considered a 'gateway' to further risk and health complications.

Life Ed adapted our On The Case and Decisions primary school modules to include discussions about vaping and e-cigarettes, scaffolding on the content about nicotine. Life Ed is launching a new primary school module in January 2024 called Take A Breath, solely focused on nicotine from both e-cigarettes and combustible tobacco products.

With the support of nib foundation, Life Ed strengthened and scaled our secondary school program Reality Now to include questions about vaping in the industry-first survey designed with the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER).

## 3. Healthy Harold Program – Primary School

### General overview

Life Ed equips the next generation with the fundamental knowledge, skills and strategies they need to thrive. We believe it takes a village to raise a child and our program is most effective when we engage the entire school community; students, teachers and parents. The Life Ed program takes often dry content for students and delivers it in a fun and engaging way, helping them develop skills, knowledge and awareness to improve their health and wellbeing.

Our programs are delivered by a team of specially trained educators and supported by tune-in lessons prior to the visit and a series of post-visit resources, our evidence-based program is not a rule book and does not dictate to children, this is essential to our success. Adopting a system-wide approach, our program is most effective when engaging the entire school community; students, teachers and parents. The Life Ed program can be delivered face to face or virtually.

Focus is given to the timing of the delivery of the program to commence before young people start to make decisions about drug use. The program is delivered through a series of structured sessions and supported by booster sessions, over multiple years and now into secondary school.

Life Ed programs are delivered by well-trained and resourced Educators. Highly trained Educators/ Facilitators can complement the teacher's role and model best practices. Students are provided with opportunities to learn and practise a wide array of personal and social skills, in particular, coping, decision-making and resistance skills, particularly to substance use.

The Life Ed program provides accurate information and meaningful learning activities that dispel myths about drug use and focus on real-life contexts and challenges.

Engagement in the Life Ed program can change perceptions of the risks associated with substance use, emphasising the immediate consequences whilst dispelling misconceptions regarding the normative nature and the expectations linked to substance use.

## **Life Ed modules that address e-cigarettes and Nicotine**

### **On the Case**

On The Case busts myths about the impact of nicotine products, such as cigarettes and e-cigarettes. In a balanced manner built on evidence, this Life Ed module builds critical literacy skills and empowers students with the knowledge and skills to make informed choices about smoking and vaping.

The key learning areas covered include:

- *What's in a cigarette or vape*
- *Effects of smoking and vaping*
- *History and laws + myths and facts*
- *Strategies to reduce harm and manage peer pressure*

### **Take a Breath – Launching in 2024**

In Take a Breath, students investigate the issues around vaping and smoking. Students are encouraged to stop and “take a breath”, ask questions, seek answers, and exercise critical thinking skills before making a decision.

The key learning areas focused on are:

- *What are vapes and cigarettes?*
- *Physical, social, financial & health effects of cigarettes, e-cigarettes and nicotine*
- *The comparisons and connections between e-cigarettes/vaping and the history of smoking*
- *Strategies & responses that model assertiveness and resilience in challenging situations*

## Decisions

Decisions explores the physical, social, financial and legal impacts of alcohol and other drugs including nicotine. Decisions equips year 5 and 6 students with the critical thinking skills and knowledge they need to make informed decisions, now and in the future. Students identify strategies to make responsible decisions in unsafe situations and social dilemmas by recognising their responsibility for the health and safety of themselves and others.

Learning outcomes include:

- *Investigating myths, facts and social norms*
- *Strategies and skills to be safe*
- *Understanding what drugs are and how they are classified*
- *Influences on decision-making (family, peers, media, culture, financial & legal)*

## 4. Reality Now Program – Secondary school

Life Ed in partnership with nib foundation and ACER have developed the 'Reality Now' program:

- *A student-centred vaping, alcohol and other drug preventative education program for secondary students.*
- *Using best-practice social norms approaches through a purpose-built survey, real-time reporting, and comprehensive education practices, we work with schools to equip young people with skills to avoid drug-related harms. Reality Now closes the gap between perception and reality about the usage of nicotine, alcohol and other drugs among young people*
- *The program uses best-practice social norms approaches through a purpose-built survey and real-time report. The program covers alcohol, nicotine and e-cigarettes, cannabis and, for year 11 only, MDMA*

Results from the survey are provided to the school to support ongoing initiatives and to help with the education and support for parents. The Life Ed website has a number of parent and teacher resources that can be accessed free of charge.

## 5. Data and insights

### Teacher Assessment Tool (TAT)

Quality programs consistently collect meaningful feedback from their key stakeholders. Life Ed's key stakeholders are our students and teachers. The data collected helps inform our program direction and demonstrate Life Ed's positive impact on society.

The teacher assessment tool allows teachers to collect evidence of learning as it happens during the primary school Life Ed session. After the session, a report is emailed directly to the teacher.

Since 2020, 4,961 primary school teachers have used the Teacher Assessment Tool to assess the learning of 102,663 students across all twelve primary Life Ed modules. 453 teachers observed and assessed the learning of 9,717 students participating in our primary vaping education program.

The Teacher Assessment Tool has become a rich data source to help inform and drive our quality assurance and identify individual professional development needs of the Educator team. It also enables Life Ed to provide data around trends and outcomes back to teachers, schools *and the Department of Education*.

### Teacher Assessment Tool outcomes

The results below indicate the percentage of primary teachers who observed their class achieve the following learning outcomes.

#### **On The Case**

*87% identified nicotine as a drug*

*88% identified that vapes contain many chemicals*

*80% discussed the laws governing the advertising and sale of nicotine products*

*78% identified some of the effects vaping has upon the body*

*84% discussed strategies to address pressure to vape*

#### **Decisions**

*77% explored the short/long term effect of drug use*

*77% identified the risk of drug use*

*84% recognised that drugs can be classified, e.g. stimulants, legal status*

*77% discussed the laws governing the sale and advertising of alcohol and tobacco*

*75% discussed ways friends can influence decisions*

In a Life Ed parent survey, teachers responded that a whole of school/community approach is needed to combat the vaping problem with widespread support for in-school programs for children delivered by external providers, as well as parent workshops and public health promotion campaigns.

#### *What additional interventions would support your school community to discourage vaping?*

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Parent workshops	53.85%	77
In school programs for kids run by external providers	43.36%	62
Teacher professional development	28.67%	41
Tougher penalties for retail outlets	29.37%	42

Public health promotion campaigns designed for young people	51.75%	74
Online teacher and parent resources	37.06%	53
Other (please specify)	5.59%	8
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>143</b>

## Student surveys

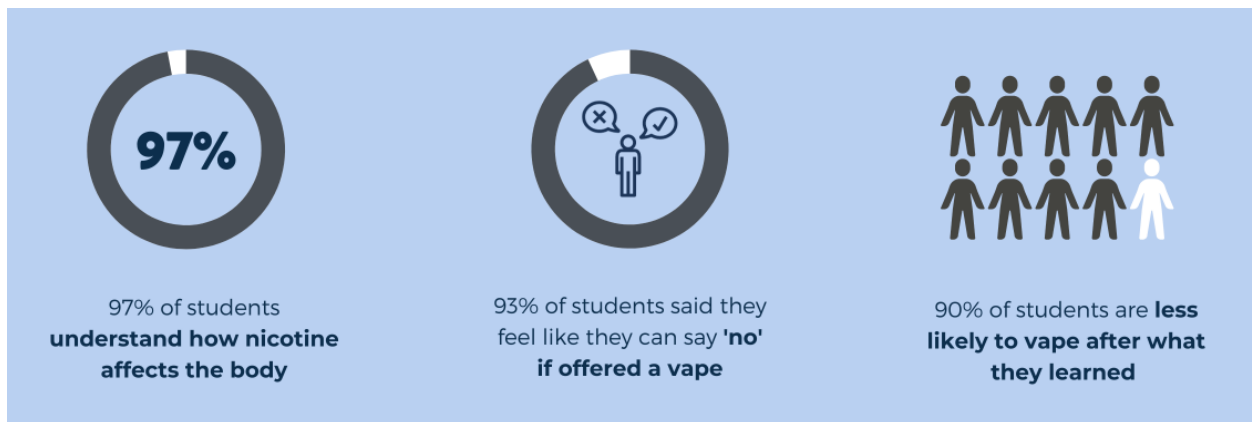
Life Ed collects student feedback from our alcohol and other drug module participants. This ensures that primary school student voices are informing future program development, as well as learning and development opportunities for our educator team.

Life Ed surveyed over 23,200 primary students who participated in its modules since 2020, to assess the program's effectiveness in improving health outcomes.

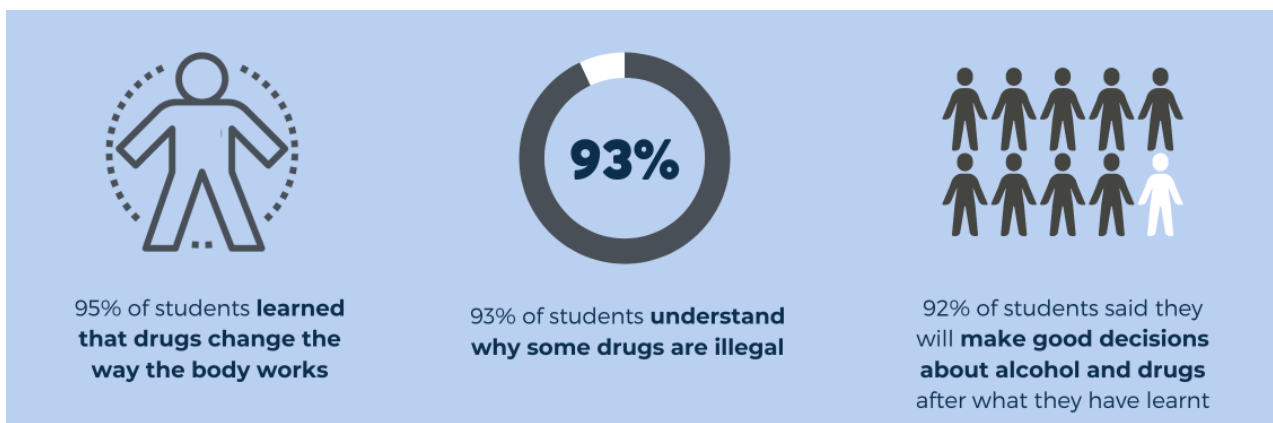
Since 2020, 30,964 primary students participated in the vaping education module, On The Case, from which 4,459 were surveyed afterwards. In addition, 46,072 students participated in Life Ed's alcohol and other drug education module, Decisions, from which 6,748 students were surveyed following the session. Positive results were found in both behavioural change intent and increased knowledge awareness.

### Student survey outcomes:

*On the Case:*



*Decisions:*





*Reality Now:*

Since 2020, Life Ed has surveyed over 13,000 secondary school students on their perceptions on their peers' attitudes and behaviours on vaping, compared to their own. These survey findings showed that 50% of students think their classmates vape 'at least every week' and 20% said 'every month or so'. When asked about their own vape use, 72% said they had never used a vape, 15% said 'rarely, or only tried it', 5% said 'every month or so', and 8% said 'at least every week'. These findings show that while there is a strong perception from young people that the majority of their secondary school peers vape, this is not the case in reality with almost three out of four students not vaping. These findings highlight the window of opportunity we have for policy change before we continue to see vaping prevalence among young people rise.

The survey also found that 25% of secondary students are 'very concerned' or 'fairly concerned' about peer pressure to vape. This statistic increased from 20% in 2021. Over the same period the survey showed that in 2021, 33% of students had 'never' vaped yet in 2023, only 23% of students said they had 'never' vaped.

In addition, survey results show that 72% of secondary students felt that vaping is a 'serious' or 'moderate problem' in their school.

When asked what would stop young people from vaping, students were most strongly in favour of not being able to buy vapes, followed by health advertisements and school programs run by service providers such as Life Ed. Programs run in schools by teachers were seen as the least likely to stop people from vaping.

<i>In your opinion, what would stop young people from vaping?</i>		
<b>ANSWER CHOICES</b>	<b>RESPONSES</b>	
In school programs for kids run by teachers	14.04%	65
In school programs for kids run by other service providers like Life Ed	34.56%	160
Not being able to buy vapes	69.55%	322
Health advertisements for young people on social media/tv	38.88%	180
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>463</b>

## **Parents**

[Generation Vape](#) surveyed parents of young people and secondary school teachers.

Results indicate:

- *86% of parents are concerned about their child vaping and four out of five see preventing their child vaping as a high priority.*
- *91% of teachers are concerned about students vaping at their school and three out of four say addressing vaping in their school is a high priority.*

The below table shows the response to a Life Ed survey from 1799 parents about key initiatives that they believe Government's should be investing in. It highlights the need for a joint effort between school education programs, tougher penalties for retailers and public health campaigns

<i>What do you think would reduce the uptake of vaping in young people?</i>		
<b>ANSWER CHOICES</b>	<b>RESPONSES</b>	
In school programs for kids	26%	464
Parent workshops	9%	166
Tougher penalties for retail outlets	27%	475
Public health promotion campaigns designed for young people	25%	457
Online resources	10%	179
Other	3%	58
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1799</b>

## 6. Partnerships

### ACER

Life Ed have worked closely with ACER over the past 5 years to create the Reality Now survey and complete all ethics approvals. ACER remain a key ongoing partner.

### NIB Foundation

NIB Foundation funded Life Ed (through their grant rounds), to develop the initial Reality Now program and survey tool, along with in school testing of the Reality Now program. NIB Foundation continue to support through program subsidies for Primary and Secondary school vaping programs delivered by Life Ed.

### NSW Ministry of Health

Life Ed have worked closely with the Ministry of Health for a number of years, more recently supporting the dissemination of the 'Do you know what your vaping' campaign. Their research has supported the ongoing development of the Life Ed Reality Now program, ensuring that messaging was aligned and consistent.

### NSW Department of Education

Over the past 4 years Life Ed have been working with the Department of Education to implement a range of innovative initiatives including the creation of virtual and online education modules to support schools, teachers and students. An Augmented reality app that demonstrates the impact of smoking on the lungs, circulatory system and body in general, and multiple other initiatives such as the development of COVID-safe classrooms, system improvements and teacher Professional Development modules.

## 7. Summary

Life Ed NSW is proud of our history in delivering best-practice alcohol and other drug education in schools. Using student-centred, interactive teaching methods and pedagogy Life Ed enables students to engage in meaningful activities with their peers and examine the social influences impacting drug use.

Life Ed has been operating for over 40 years across NSW and is well respected and recognised by students, teachers and parents. The insights and information we have presented above shows clearly that parents, teachers and students are concerned about the increase in vaping among young people. We have, and continue to collate, a significant data set which clearly shows that since 2020, year on year there has been an increase in self-reported vaping among kids between the age of 13-16.

With improved research an insight from [Generation Vape](#) around the harms of vaping, we know that this is a concerning statistic, that needs to be urgently addressed. Life Ed believe that early education, at scale, starting in Primary school needs to be a key part of the solution, along with the recommendations from NSW Cancer Council.

The data and insights from teachers and students during and after the Life Ed lessons are irrefutable -

### Primary students

- gain knowledge about the impacts of substance use on bodies and communities
- feel more confident to 'say no' if offered vapes or other substances
- say they are 'less likely' to vape after Life Ed lessons

### Teachers of primary students

- observe significant knowledge transfer and acquisition

### Secondary students

- vastly overestimate their peers' usage of vapes'
- 25% feel 'very or fairly concerned' about peer pressure to vape
- 72% think their school has a 'serious or moderate' problem with vapes
- need immediate support to stem the year-on-year uptick in vape usage

We must prioritise the health and well-being of our young people and protect them from nicotine addiction and the detrimental health impacts from vaping. Life Ed strongly believes that the time to support our young people is now. Life Ed must deliver preventative education to students for several compelling reasons:

**Vast Overestimation of Peers' Vaping Habits:** Secondary students vastly overestimate the prevalence of vaping among their peers vastly. This misconception can lead to a sense of normalisation and peer pressure, making it crucial to address this perception. Life Ed's evidence-based programs can effectively debunk myths and provide accurate information to students, helping them understand the real extent of the issue.

**Concerns About Peer Pressure:** A significant 25% of secondary students express "very or fairly concerned" feelings regarding peer pressure to vape. This concern highlights the urgent need for preventive education that equips students with the skills and knowledge to resist such pressures. Life Ed's programs focus on building students' assertiveness and resilience, providing them with practical tools to combat peer pressure effectively.

**High Perception of a 'Serious or Moderate' Vaping Problem in Schools:** An alarming 72% of students believe that their school has a "serious or moderate" vaping problem. This perception reflects the urgency of

addressing vaping among students. Life Ed's tailored modules for secondary school, such as the "Reality Now" program, provide essential education and awareness to help reduce the prevalence of vaping and its associated risks within school communities.

**Year-on-Year Uptick in Vape Usage:** The need for immediate support to stem the year-on-year increase in vape usage among secondary students cannot be understated. Life Ed is equipped to provide evidence-based education programs that can effectively counter this trend by delivering comprehensive information on the risks and consequences of vaping, supporting students in making informed choices.

In conclusion, the prevailing concerns among secondary students regarding vaping, their misperceptions about its prevalence, and the increasing trend of vape usage make it imperative to empower them with knowledge and skills to make informed decisions. Life Ed's programs have a proven track record in equipping students with the information and tools they need to combat vaping, reduce peer pressure, and address the issue of vaping within the school community effectively. Delivering more preventative education through Life Ed is a prudent and necessary step to safeguard the well-being of our youth.

## Recommendations

Life Ed NSW applauds the NSW parliamentary inquiry into reducing e-cigarette use. In summary, we recommend that, due to the very rapid escalation of vaping use among NSW young people, there is an urgent need for:

- A NSW-wide vaping education program, with a focus on upper primary school students, and extending into secondary school (Years 5-10) as an early intervention and demand reduction approach
- Engagement of health education providers who have strong partnerships with schools, who can deliver vaping education to students, alongside the classroom teacher
- Free delivery of vaping education to schools, via funding for providers so that programs can be quickly scaled up and delivered to ensure maximum reach, access and equity
- A whole of school approach, including parent engagement and education, and teacher professional development
- Support to teachers through online resources and activities.
- Implementation of recommendations from NSW Cancer Council regarding regulation and legislation reform.

We have a window of opportunity to prevent a new generation from becoming addicted to nicotine, and we must not wait for the e-cigarette crisis to reach the catastrophic point we saw with tobacco.

As a partner to almost half of all NSW primary schools, Life Ed NSW looks forward to contributing our people and resources to supporting a concerted and focused school-based education campaign aimed at preventing future use of vapes by young people, and the harms they cause.