What is this research about?
Although tobacco use has decreased in Canada it remains the country’s leading cause of premature death. Most people (85%) start smoking before the age of 18 despite the fact that Canadian federal laws make it illegal for people under the age of 18 to buy cigarettes. Many provinces set the bar at 19 years. Therefore, schools are a key environment to support youth remaining tobacco-free. The researchers in this study assessed the link between school tobacco policy and smoking status in Ontario elementary and secondary schools in 2003.

What did the researchers do?
Reitsma and Manske (2004) surveyed a total of 6,430 grades 6-8 students and 23,458 grades 9-12 students from 57 elementary and 29 secondary schools on their smoking habits and their school’s smoking policy.

What you need to know:
While enforcing smoking policies may be effective at elementary school levels — for example, enforcing the tobacco policy by keeping smokers off school property appears to be an effective preventive measure at the elementary school level — secondary school policy-makers should be careful to avoid alienating smokers.

Students completed the School Smoking Profile (now called SHAPES – Tobacco Module) that assessed students’ smoking status and perceptions of school tobacco control policy.

The researchers characterized the sample by gender, smoking status, school location and school size and analyzed the data to determine how to combine the five policy items into a simpler structure. This identified two “components” to
characterize student perceptions of school smoking policy: Rules and Enforcement.

What did the researchers find?
The researchers found that the percentage of current smokers increased with each grade level from grade 6 – 12. Larger elementary and high schools had significantly fewer current smokers than smaller schools. In elementary schools stronger enforcement reduced the chances of being a smoker. However, strong enforcement had the opposite effect in secondary school.

The use of students’ opinions and perceptions of school policy was a strong point in this study versus previous studies that used one administrator or teacher’s report to define the school tobacco policy. The results suggest that elementary and secondary schools are very different environments when it comes to anti-smoking enforcement.

How can you use this research?
While enforcing smoking policies is effective at elementary school levels, secondary school policy-makers must carefully consider sanctions to avoid alienating smokers. However, enforcing the tobacco policy by keeping smokers off school property appears to be effective at the elementary school level.

About the researchers
Angela Reitsma completed her Masters degree with Propel Centre for Population Health Impact. Propel does impact oriented research, evaluation and knowledge exchange to help reduce the incidence of cancer (and other diseases that are prevented by reducing tobacco use and increasing physical activity and healthy eating).

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References:

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Smoking, policies, schools, Ontario

About this summary
The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE’s clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary reflects findings from this study only and is not necessarily representative of the broader body of literature on this subject.

This summary has been adapted from the ResearchSnapshot series developed by York University and ResearchImpact and has been developed according to writing and design principles unique to OERE. For more information about this summary or the OERE network please contact oere.knaer.oise@utoronto.ca.