“Smoking in Ontario schools: Does policy make a difference?”

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 that Canadian federal laws make it illegal for people under the age of 18 to buy cigarettes, while many provinces set the bar higher still at 19 years of age. Due to the amount of time that youth spend in school up until this age, schools can play a key role in creating environments that support youth in 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 an elementary school level (for example, keeping smokers off school property appears to be an effective measure in preventing students from smoking at the elementary level) at the secondary school level, such policies may alienate student smokers rather than supporting smoke-free lifestyles.

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 student perceptions of school smoking policy: Rules and Enforcement.

The use of students’ opinions and perceptions of school policy was a unique aspect of this study, since many previous studies have tended to use administrator or teacher reports to define school tobacco policies.

What did the researchers find? The researchers found that the percentage of current smokers increased with each grade level from grade 6 - 12, although larger elementary and high schools had significantly fewer current smokers than smaller schools.

In elementary schools, stronger enforcement of smoking policies were linked to lower rates of student smokers. However, strong enforcement had the opposite effect at the secondary school level.

How can you use this research? While enforcing smoking policies is effective at elementary school levels, secondary school policy-makers will need to consider whether sanctions against smokers at the high school level, work to alienate student smokers, rather than supporting anti-smoking habits.

It is noteworthy, though, that the strict enforcement of the tobacco policies at the elementary level (such as keeping smokers off school property) appears to be an effective strategy to prevent smoking 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).

Steve Manske heads the Youth Health program at the Propel Centre for Population Health Impact.

References

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Smoking, Educational policy, Elementary schools, Secondary schools, School Environment, Student health

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About this summary

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This summary reflects findings from this study only and is not necessarily representative of the broader body of literature on this subject. Please consult the original document for complete details about this research. In case of any disagreement, the original document should be understood as authoritative.

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