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Memorandum To: Directors of Education

From: Denise Dwyer
Assistant Deputy Minister
Leadership and Learning Environment Division

Date: April 19, 2017

Subject: Legalization of Cannabis – Supports for Schools

Last week, the federal government introduced legislation to legalize and regulate cannabis in Canada. At this point, the Ontario government is reviewing the bill in detail and determining how it will affect our province and local municipalities.

Since the federal government made its commitment to legalize and regulate cannabis, the Ontario government has established a dedicated secretariat that leads and coordinates the province's efforts through cross-government working groups focused on policy and program development. The Ministry of Education is part of this initiative, so I am writing to update you on work underway in the ministry in relation to this issue.

First and foremost, it is important to acknowledge that with a few exceptions, cannabis use is still illegal and it will remain so unless the new federal legislation comes into effect. All existing prohibitions against cannabis use remain in effect. For instance, suspension will still be considered for a student possessing cannabis depending on the results of the principal's investigation.

The Ministry of Education is working collaboratively with other ministries across government to ensure that any new framework for cannabis addresses public health impacts of legalization. We are focused on ensuring that youth and other vulnerable populations are protected. We are also working within the ministry to determine any changes to curriculum and policies that may be needed. This work will include considering the possible development of new or compilation of current resources on substance use, addictions and related behaviours. We will keep you apprised as this work develops.

In the meantime, I would like to remind you of resources that may be useful if you or your school leaders and educators are receiving questions related to cannabis. I understand that the increased media coverage stemming from federal legislative activities may lead to questions from educators, parents, students, and other members of the school community. I have appended a short Q&A with links to existing resources that may be of use when answering questions.

Sincerely,

Original signed by

Denise Dwyer
Assistant Deputy Minister
Leadership and Learning Environment Division

c: Council of Ontario Directors of Education

Attachments: Legalization of Cannabis Questions and Answers

Legalization of Cannabis: Questions and Answers

Curriculum Connections

Q: What do students currently learn about cannabis in school?

A: Cannabis is mentioned in several curricula, including: Health and Physical Education, Social Sciences and Humanities and Canadian and World Studies – Law.

- Under the direction of boards and principals, teachers plan units of study, develop a variety of teaching approaches, and select appropriate resources to address the curriculum expectations, taking into account the needs and abilities of their students.
- The 2015 Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum is current, relevant and age-appropriate, and will help students develop the skills to navigate today’s complex world.
 - The HPE curriculum covers Substance Use, Addictions and Related Behaviours in a comprehensive, age-appropriate way. It contains comprehensive learning that aims to discourage and prevent drug use among young people.
 - The focus of the learning is on understanding health concepts, making healthy choices and making connections for healthy living.
 - The curriculum helps students acquire the knowledge and skills they need to develop, maintain, and enjoy healthy living as well as to solve problems, make decisions, and set goals that are directly related to their personal health and well-being.
 - Student learning about cannabis and other illegal drugs occurs directly within the Healthy Living component of the HPE curriculum.
 - While learning about cannabis is specifically addressed in Grade 6, student learning about substance use, abuse and misuse is part of a continuum of learning that extends from Grades 1 to 12.

Q: Where can I learn more about what my child is being taught about cannabis?

A: The Ministry of Education has developed a series of resources for parents on the learning in the Health and Physical Education curriculum that are available on the ministry’s website: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/multiLanguages.html>

- Currently, there is not a resource specific to substance use in the curriculum. However, the ministry website has grade by grade information about the Health and Physical Education curriculum, which includes an overview of how students learn about substance use, addictions and related behaviour, with a focus on developing the skills and knowledge to make healthy decisions.

- A Parent's Guide to the Revised Health and Physical Education Curriculum, Grades 1 to 12 <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/HPEguideRev.pdf>
- Grade 6 overview <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/grade6hpe.pdf>
Grade 9 – 12
overview <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/grade9to12hpe.pdf>

Q: What impacts will legalization have on Ontario's curriculum?

A: Legalization would result in minor changes to the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum and other subject areas (e.g., Social Sciences and Humanities and Canadian and World Studies - Law).

- The Ministry of Education is monitoring developments to ensure we are ready for any changes that may be required.

Suspensions and Expulsions

Q: Is possession of cannabis still a possible reason to suspend a student?

A: Yes.

- Cannabis (except for medical purposes, with a physician's prescription) remains an illegal drug.
- Suspension will still be considered for a student possessing cannabis.
- Before suspending a student, the principal must consider the individual circumstances of that student and must specifically take into account mitigating and other factors.
- Where a principal believes a student has engaged in trafficking cannabis, the student must be suspended up to 20 school days, pending the principal's investigation, to determine whether to recommend to the board that the student be expelled. When determining the length of the suspension and whether to recommend the student for expulsion, the principal must consider the individual circumstances of that student and must specifically take into account mitigating and other factors.
- Additional information is available on the ministry's website: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/suspexp.html>

Q: What resources are available to Principals and other board staff dealing with suspensions related to cannabis?

A: The Ministry of Education’s resource, “Reporting and Responding to Incidents: A Resource for Board Employees” outlines the responsibilities of all board staff in relation to incidents that could lead to suspension or expulsion: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/keepkidsafeschool.pdf>

- “Supporting Bias-Free Progressive Discipline in Schools Resource Guide” <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/SupportResGuide.pdf> outlines how system leaders should take mitigating and other factors into consideration at all points along the continuum of progressive discipline. This guide was developed in collaboration with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

Q: My child has been suspended in relation to cannabis. Where can I learn more about the rules around suspensions?

A: The Ministry of Education’s resource, “Suspension and Expulsion: What Parents and Students Need to Know” outlines the requirements and processes related to suspensions and expulsions.

- This resource is available on the ministry’s website: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/suspexp.html>.
- You may also wish to review the “Parents’ Guide to the Ontario Code of Conduct”, which outlines expectations for behaviour for all members of the school community: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/code.html>.

Mental Health and Addictions

Q: We already have students who we know or suspect are dealing with substance use issues. How do we support them?

A: The Ministry of Education’s resource “Supporting Minds” has a chapter on “Substance Abuse Problems” (chapter six).

- This chapter has excellent, evidence-based information for educators, including “A Continuum of Warning Signs” and “Strategies for Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment for All Students.”
- The chapter also contains more than four pages of references for additional information.
- “Supporting Minds” is available on the ministry’s website: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/SupportingMinds.pdf>

Q: How can we support students in our schools to help reduce the likelihood that they could develop a substance use issue?

A: There is work underway in all school boards across the province and through School Mental Health ASSIST to promote universal mental health, and to contribute to the protective factors that can help reduce the likelihood of a student developing a substance use problem.

- For example, the work underway in “mentally healthy classrooms” to strengthen a student’s self-esteem, coping skills, and life skills, and to provide a supportive environment would help reduce the risk of substance abuse.
- School Mental Health ASSIST has modules on creating mentally healthy classrooms available on their website: <https://smh-assist.ca/blog/2016/11/14/creating-and-sustaining-mentally-healthy-classrooms/>