

Introduction

On October 17, 2018, non-medical cannabis will become legal in Alberta and across Canada. Wondering what to expect? You are not alone. Many teachers, administrators and other leaders in the education sector want to know how cannabis legalization will affect their students, classrooms, schools and school authorities.

Alberta Education, Alberta Health and Alberta Health Services have collaborated to develop this frequently-asked-questions (FAQ) resource. Our goal is to provide straightforward responses to questions you may be facing at school. It is important that we work together to prevent and/or delay the initiation of cannabis use by youth, to promote healthy decision-making and lower-risk cannabis use and to ensure student safety at school.

After legalization, **all forms of cannabis will remain illegal** for most students attending school in Alberta. The minimum age to use, buy, possess and cultivate cannabis in Alberta will be 18. This is the same minimum age for tobacco and alcohol use and sales.

This resource is organized with reference to the [Comprehensive School Health](#) framework, a whole-school approach for considering the implications of cannabis legalization across four key components:

- Social and physical environment
- Teaching and learning
- Policy
- Partnerships and services

Throughout this document, you'll see that we use terms like *non-medical cannabis*, *legal cannabis*, or simply *cannabis*, but that we avoid referring to use that is *recreational*. This is important because it can make cannabis use sound like fun, especially to youth. You'll also see that we've identified recommended resources from reputable provincial and national sources. For a complete list, see [Clarity on cannabis: Recommended resources for schools](#).

Cannabis legalization is new territory. No one has all of the answers yet. We will continue to update this resource as new information becomes available. Updated versions will be posted alongside other cannabis education materials at [DrugSafe](#), a website maintained by Alberta Health Services.

Social and Physical Environment

How might the social environment at school change with cannabis legalization?

The social environment at your school may gradually change as Albertans adjust to legal cannabis. Some experts suggest that legalization will open up new opportunities for non-threatening, non-judgmental conversations about cannabis and other substance use. These types of conversations involve talking about both the positive and negative aspects of cannabis use in an unbiased way. They support students in expressing a diverse range of values, expectations and experiences without fear of legal consequence or social stigma.

Recommended Resources



[The cannabis talk kit: Know how to talk to your teen](#)

[Discussing pot and driving with teenagers: A discussion guide for adults](#)

Our recommended resources offer a range of practical tips and evidence-based strategies on how to facilitate open, honest conversations about cannabis. These tools are not just for parents – they are useful for educators and all adults who care about youth.

In a changing cannabis landscape, [welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments](#) remain central to healthy school environments. These environments help students to develop healthy self-esteem, coping skills and life skills – factors that can protect against problematic substance use.

How might the physical environment at school change with cannabis legalization?

The physical environment at your school – its classrooms, hallways, indoor and outdoor learning spaces - should not be affected by cannabis legalization. The provincial *Act to Control and Regulate Cannabis* prohibits public smoking or vaping of cannabis on school property and childcare facility property and near areas that children and youth frequent, like playgrounds and sports fields. It also requires a minimum 100m separation distance between cannabis stores and schools.

Some municipalities have enacted stricter regulations - check with your local municipal government.

Teaching and Learning

Where are the opportunities to address cannabis legalization in current programs of study?

The legalization of cannabis does not change existing curricula in Alberta. The current Kindergarten to Grade 9 (K-9) Health and Life Skills program of studies and high school Career and Life Management (CALM) program of studies enable students to make well-informed, healthy choices and to develop behaviours that contribute to the well-being of self and others.

In the K-9 Health and Life Skills program of studies, students learn about positive health habits, substance abuse awareness, and the importance of decision-making and refusal skills when offered substances. They also examine and evaluate the impact of substance use on wellness.

At the high school level, the CALM program of studies enables students to evaluate choices that can create barriers to achieving and maintaining health, including the use of alcohol and other substances. Students also examine and explain the media's role and influence over personal, emotional/spiritual expression, peer pressure and the use of alcohol and other substances.

Teachers are responsible for planning units of study, developing instructional approaches and selecting age-appropriate resources that align with curriculum outcomes.

How can I help my students to learn the facts about cannabis?

Even though cannabis will soon be legal, its use is not without risk. Youth are especially vulnerable to the effects of cannabis because brain development is still occurring until about the age of 25. Cannabis use at an early age can negatively affect school performance, attendance, participation in extracurricular activities and may increase risk of dropping out. Youth who use cannabis early and often are also at increased risk of dependency and long-term health and social problems. For example:

- Problems with memory, concentration, thinking and decision making
- Mental health problems, especially if there is a personal or family history of mental illness
- Physical health problems including respiratory problems from smoking cannabis
- Difficulties with relationships at home, school or work

For more information, see [Health effects of cannabis](#) (Government of Canada).

As a teacher or other educator, you are uniquely positioned to equip students with credible, accurate information about cannabis. You can also be a trusted resource for parents/caregivers and other members of the school community.

Look for materials that are authored by provincial or national-level reputable sources, especially those that aim to prevent or delay cannabis use among youth, and those that provide practical advice about how to reduce the risk of harm. Our recommended resources are a great place to start. Consider including them in your school communications, like e-newsletters, blogs and social media.

Recommended Resources



For students:

[Cannabis: Important things to know](#)

For parents:

[Clarity on cannabis: What Alberta parents/caregivers need to know](#)

For everyone:

[Canada's lower-risk cannabis use guidelines](#)

How can I access professional learning about cannabis?

As cannabis crosses into legal territory, it might feel like there is a lot to learn. A range of learning resources are available at no cost from Alberta Health Services to help inform educators. For example:

[DrugSafe](#), the trusted source for Albertans to find vital information on reducing harms of drugs and alcohol.

[Online sessions](#) from Mental Health Online Resources for Educators (MORE):

- Substance abuse prevention in the classroom
- Understanding youth substance use
- Curious about cannabis?

[Archived presentations](#) from Healthy Minds, Healthy Children – Marijuana Series:

- Part 1: Cannabis, brain development and mental health
- Part 2: Cannabis legalization in Canada: Implications for youth education and prevention

For more information about addiction and mental health services available in your community, contact your local AHS Addiction and Mental Health office.

The Canadian Public Health Association also hosts a free [cannabis webinar series](#) aimed broadly at health and social service providers. The first session focuses on youth and cannabis legalization.

Policy

What school authority policies need to be revised to align with legislative changes around cannabis?

In Alberta, school authorities are independent entities responsible for developing their own policies and procedures in alignment with provincial and federal legislation. Some school authorities in the province are using the legalization of cannabis as an opportunity to revise and strengthen existing policies, such as those that address:

- Student codes of conduct
- Possession, use, sharing or selling of both legal and illicit substances at school, including alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and other substances
- Positive student behavior and/or discipline
- Incident reporting and response
- Suspension and/or expulsion from school, taking into account mitigating and other factors

Some school authorities are also working towards comprehensive policies to promote smoke-free spaces – those that restrict all forms of smoking on school property, including tobacco, cannabis, vaping and hookah/shisha. Action on Smoking and Health, an Alberta-based registered charity that promotes tobacco control, has a model policy on its [School board resource hub](#).

Finally, Occupational Health and Safety legislation requires that employers provide safe, healthy and productive work environments. Cannabis legalization presents an opportunity for school districts to revise policies that address impairment from cannabis and other substances and safety in the workplace. A new [fact sheet](#) from the Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan provides an overview of best practices to address substance-related impairment in the workplace through organizational policy.

Partnerships and Services

How can schools support students with substance use, mental health or addiction issues?

Trying cannabis is unlikely to cause serious problems, but even occasional use has potential for harm. Your relationship with students positions you to recognize changes in behavior that may indicate problematic use. You may notice that a student has problems with attendance, trouble with memory or concentration, or experiences changes in friendships or mood.

If you have concerns, it is helpful to connect with health and social service partners in your local community, such as those that offer education, counselling and/or treatment for mental health problems or addiction. Use the recommended resources to get started and take time to get to know service providers in your local area. Work with staff at your school to ensure you know what to do if you suspect a problem.

Recommended Resources For Students in Need



[AHS Addiction Help Line:](#)
1-866-332-2322

[AHS Mental Health Help Line:](#)
1-877-303-2642

[Health Link Alberta:](#)
811

[Kids Help Phone:](#)
1-800-668-6868
(call, text, chat)

How can schools and parents work together when it comes to cannabis legalization?

Parents/caregivers are important partners in shaping the way that children and youth understand and experience legal cannabis. As a teacher or other educator, you can encourage parents to use strategies that may prevent or delay the onset of cannabis use. For example, parents can:

- Stay connected by doing activities with their children and getting to know their friends
- Have open, honest and ongoing conversations about cannabis and other substances
- Be ready to answer questions, seek out information and reflect on their own use of substances

You can find more practical tips for parents outlined in resources already mentioned in this document, including:

- [Clarity on cannabis: What Alberta parents/caregivers need to know](#)
- [The cannabis talk kit: Know how to talk to your teen](#)

For More Information

[DrugSafe](#)

Alberta Health Services

[Cannabis legalization in Alberta](#)

Government of Alberta

[Cannabis in Canada: Get the facts](#)

Government of Canada

[Canadian student tobacco, alcohol and drugs survey](#)

Statistics Canada