

# Quebec school principals sound alarm over black-market vaping rings

A Laval private school principal expelled six students and warns “vaping is a real problem in our schools and the students don’t think it’s a big deal.”

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This Thursday, Dec. 20, 2018 file photo shows a Juul electronic cigarette starter kit at a smoke shop in New York. According to letters released on Friday, Feb. 8, 2019, the head of the Food and Drug Administration is questioning whether electronic cigarette maker Juul and its new partner Altria are following through on pledges to help reverse the current epidemic of underage vaping. *SETH WENIG / AP*

Myriam Stephens knew something was amiss at her private high school in Laval when students were coming to the cafeteria looking to change \$100 and \$50 bills.

Like principals across Quebec and throughout North America, Stephens had heard rumours that some students were being exposed to nicotine through a wildly popular fad called vaping or Juuling.

In many schools, students as young as 13 are using a new generation of e-cigarettes that resemble a USB stick or a pen (<https://montrealgazette.com/pmn/news-pmn/vape-pen-causes-small-fire-as-passengers-board-plane-2/wcm/244942cf-2eb9-4398-a668-d4cbb6f89e15>) that can easily be concealed from teachers or monitors.

The slick, battery-powered devices deliver nicotine through a liquid that turns into vapour when inhaled.

Students are vaping in washrooms, near lockers, outside school buildings and on buses. In a couple of cases, principals in Ottawa and Maryland have removed the main bathroom door so monitors can observe what's going on inside the washrooms.

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“In the fall, we noticed a different energy in the school and there were a lot of gatherings,” said Stephens, the principal of Collège Citoyen.

After a sniffer dog detected several vapes in a student’s locker following the Christmas break, Stephens discovered that six pupils age 13 to 16 were supplying and selling vapes to fellow students.

### **‘The younger ones were selling’**

“The older students were the suppliers and the younger ones were selling,” Stephens said. “Other students were given a cut if they sent a student to a (seller). It was an opportunity to make quick money and they didn’t think they would be caught.”

The students were buying the vapes for \$40 to \$60 and reselling them for \$80 to \$120, she said.

Stephens expelled six students last week and said she's speaking out because "[vaping is a real problem in our schools](https://montrealgazette.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/health-canada-launches-campaign-to-educate-teens-on-the-health-risks-of-vaping/wcm/a83e3eb8-5b56-4f13-b3ec-66f712532c5b) (<https://montrealgazette.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/health-canada-launches-campaign-to-educate-teens-on-the-health-risks-of-vaping/wcm/a83e3eb8-5b56-4f13-b3ec-66f712532c5b>) and the students don't think it's a big deal."

Over the past several months, Quebec's anti-smoking lobby and Canada's health minister have been bombarded with emails and phone calls from principals and parents alerting them to the problem.

The federal government announced this month that it will restrict e-cigarette advertising, including banning advertising on websites and social media aimed at young people.

But Flory Doucas, co-president of the Quebec Coalition for Tobacco Control, wonders if the measures are too little too late.

"There are no regulations (in Canada) about how much nicotine can be in a vape and the long-term use is not known," she said. "It has started a whole new subculture."

Last May, [Ottawa legalized the sale and promotion of vaping products with nicotine to adults](https://montrealgazette.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/parliament-to-regulate-vaping-implement-plain-packaging-for-tobacco-products/wcm/4d0d6469-fe7c-42d3-99f5-918eb4033a58) (<https://montrealgazette.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/parliament-to-regulate-vaping-implement-plain-packaging-for-tobacco-products/wcm/4d0d6469-fe7c-42d3-99f5-918eb4033a58>), but Doucas said the devices have made their way into the hands of adolescents and she fears using vapes could be a gateway to smoking cigarettes.

## **Accessible through older siblings or online**

Vapes are easily accessible through older siblings or online, Stephens and Doucas say.

Students are using prepaid credit cards that they buy in pharmacies and use a fictitious birthdate to buy the devices online. They then promote the product on their Snapchat story or on Instagram. "One student had a

picture of the vapes on a bed with the prices beside them,” Stephens recalled.

E-cigarettes have been on the market for more than a decade and are said to be useful in helping adults quit smoking. But recently, manufacturers such as Juul Labs Inc. and Montreal-based Imperial Tobacco have designed and marketed smaller models of vapes that appeal to young people.

The Vype E-Pod starter kit, which sells for \$45 online, is being advertised by Imperial Tobacco as a vape that looks small but hits big.

Many of the new vapes have such flavours as cherry and watermelon and are being used by youth who have never smoked cigarettes, experts say.

During a pre-Christmas meeting with fellow principals at the English Montreal School Board, Donna Manos was commiserating with colleagues about the trend that’s sweeping through Montreal high schools.

Manos, who is principal at LaurenHill Academy in St-Laurent, said she has suspended a handful of students this year who were caught vaping at school.

## **‘They love gadgets’**

“There is the allure of this little gadget, and they love gadgets,” Manos said. “These little vapes are now becoming the new ‘in’ thing. They want to be cool and be in the circle of coolness.”

She said vaping appears to have petered out a bit over the past few months, but she’s worried that students who vape could become addicted to nicotine. “When they are buying from a stranger or on the internet, they don’t know what’s in it.”

She said some of the students dismiss the concerns of adults, insisting that “everyone has a vape.”

The most recent study on vaping use among 27,000 16- to 19-year-olds in Canada, the U.S. and England showed that vaping increased by almost 50 per cent from September 2017 to September 2018, according to David Hammond, one of Canada's leading experts in tobacco and vaping use.

"We are seeing more regular vaping (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/watchwords-vaping-is-a-word-thats-likely-to-last>) in terms of people doing it weekly and daily," said Hammond, a professor at the University of Waterloo's school of public health.

Hammond attributes the increase in Canada to a May 2018 federal law that allows vaping products with nicotine to be marketed and sold more broadly, along with the development of a new technology (the Juul) that delivers high levels of nicotine.

"If you have too much nicotine, you get an unpleasant taste in your throat," he said. "But they (Juul Labs) have figured out a way to deliver high levels of nicotine without that harsh taste."

Although there are no conclusive studies showing vaping can lead to nicotine addiction, "we are starting to see patterns of use that are consistent with dependence among kids," Hammond said. "It's a fad with a highly addictive drug. The question is: does this fad fade away, or does it lead to long-term use and potentially dependence?"

When Stephens told parents she was expelling their children because they were selling vapes, she said, they were dumbfounded.

"One parent said: 'My child never goes out, he behaves and does nothing wrong,' " Stephens recalled.

She said she hopes the controversy encourages parents to talk to their children about vaping. Parents also need to learn about Snapchat and Instagram so they're aware of what their children are up to when they're in their bedrooms.

"The cellphone is the window on the private life of a child," she said. "They

can do worse things (when they are alone with a cellphone) than when they're in a shopping mall on a Friday night."

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Vape pens collected from students in a Florida school. *MALCOLM DENEMARK / ASSOCIATED PRESS*

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