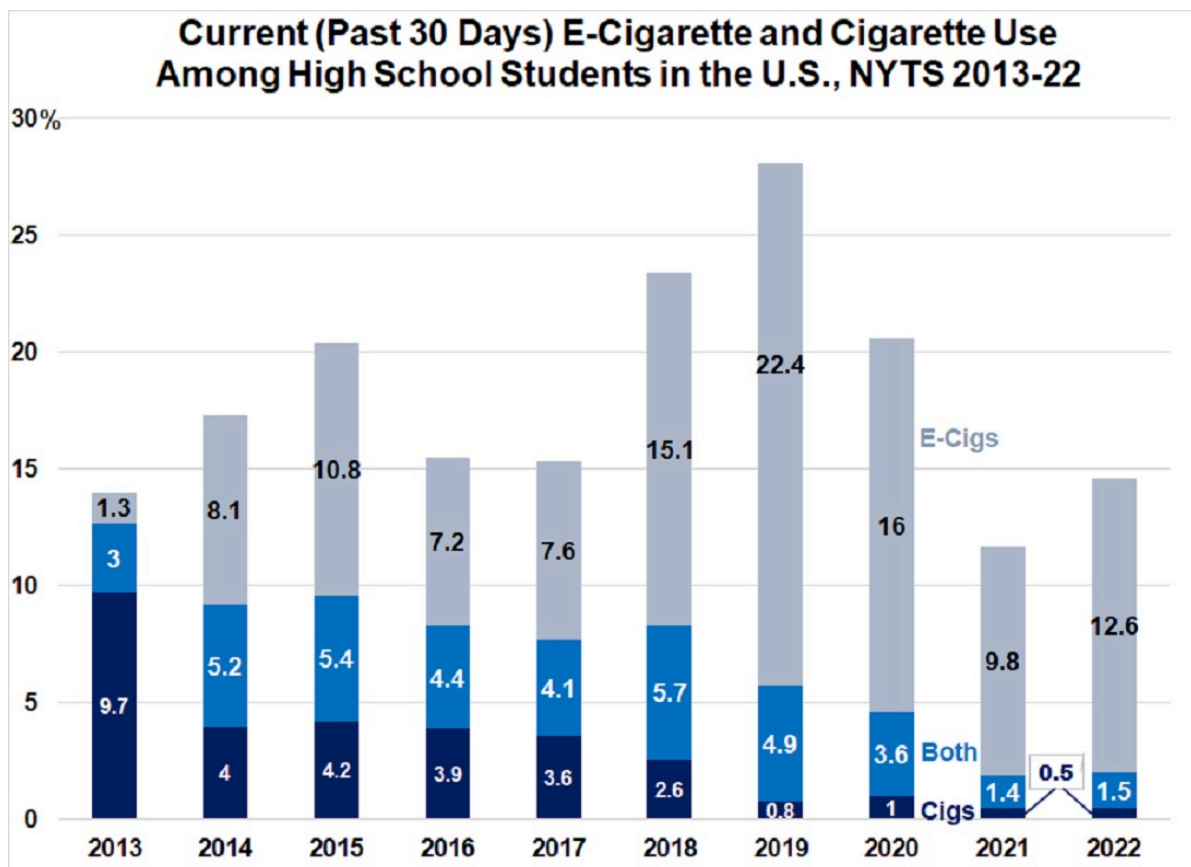


Vaping in NYC Schools: How DOE Failures Helped Create a Teen Epidemic

Walk into almost any New York City public high school bathroom, and you're likely to see a common scene: a cloud of smoke, the scent of flavored vapor, a group of students gathered in the corners, and no adult supervision. Vaping has exploded in popularity among teens, but it's not just peer pressure or nicotine that's to blame. The New York City Department of Education (DOE), a system meant to protect students in public schools, has turned a blind eye to this growing crisis, failing the students and becoming a major driver of this problem.

Figure 1



Note. Graph from High School Vaping Up Slightly in 2022, But Smoking Rates Remained Vanishingly Low, by Tobacco Truth, February 23, 2023.

<https://rodutobaccotruth.blogspot.com/2023/02/high-school-vaping-up-slightly-in-2022.html>

According to the 2024 National Youth Tobacco Survey, 1.63 million American adolescents had vaped e-cigarettes, and over a quarter of them vape every day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). In NYC, despite schools banning vape products, enforcement is almost nil. Bathrooms are where it's at. Vape detectors are either broken, never present, or ignored. Students say it's so widespread that they commonly see other students vaping alongside "No Smoking of Vaping" signs with impunity. Even schools like The City College of New York (CCNY) have "No Smoking or Vaping signs" displayed, but in practice, the habit continues right under their noses.

Figure 1



Note. Image from City College of New York campus of a no-smoking or vaping sign, May 9, 2025.

These warnings look official but don't provide value. Students know that unless they're blatantly obvious about it, no one's going to catch them. It's not so much an issue of rebellion—it's a matter of failed systems. The DOE's reaction to vaping has been shallow: paper rules, but nothing that in practice affects behavior.

One such failure is the haphazard use of vape detectors. HALO Smart Sensor (n.d.) says that vape detectors function as they should when correctly installed and supplemented with adult supervision. But in the majority of NYC schools, they are nowhere to be found or not utilized at all. Soon, students are aware of which bathrooms are "safe zones"—not from injury, but from detection.

Peer pressure is in there, for sure, but teenagers these days are faced with a kind of social pressure their ancestors weren't. Teenagers today live in a hyper-connected world where image rules. It's not just about being friends during the school day; it's about being up to date on group text strings, Snapchat streaks, and TikTok challenges. Refusing to vape isn't just the possibility of losing friends; it's the possibility of being shunned from whole online communities. Unlike past generations, there is no relief from social pressure—it follows you home, lives on your phone, and reappears with each notification. Combine that pressure with easy access and no adult pushback, and you've got a recipe for addiction. Vape products are still being sold to underage students across NYC. A 2023 investigation found that dozens of stores near school zones sold vape pens to teens without checking ID (Rodu, 2023). One teen I interviewed from the Bronx said, "I've been buying since ninth grade. They never ask for anything."

Where is the DOE in all of this? Mostly quiet. As schools plaster up signs and deliver the occasional lecture, students say the messaging is hollow-sounding and boring. Teens aren't tuned in to health class fear campaigns; they're viewing TikTok on vape tricks and viewing their favorite influencers puffing mindlessly on YouTube. There's such a disconnect between the real teen experience and the policies produced by adults who don't live there.

Fixing this doesn't mean punishing students in more ways—mean it: come through on actual solutions. One, schools need working vape detectors and regular adult sweeps through identified vape hangouts. Two, store owners who sell to kids need to be punished, not with wrist-slaps. Third, the DOE needs to stop talking at students and talk with them. Let teens help create the message, and use social media to fight back against vaping. The NYC school vaping epidemic isn't a teenager's problem. It's a policy problem. And until the adults in charge start treating it like one, students will continue to pay the price.

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