

# Schools are using surveillance tech to catch students vaping, snaring some with harsh punishments

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In this April 10, 2018 file photo, a high school principal displays vaping devices that were confiscated from students in such places as restrooms or hallways at the school in Massachusetts. Schools around the country are installing sensors and cameras to crack down on student vaping, and handing out harsh punishments for many who are caught. Schools have invested millions of dollars in the surveillance technology, including federal COVID-19 emergency relief money meant to help schools through the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Steven

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When Aaliyah Iglesias was caught vaping at a Texas high school, she didn't realize how much could be taken from her.

Suddenly, the rest of her high school experience was threatened: being student council president, her role as debate team captain and walking at graduation. Even her college scholarships were at risk. She was sent to the district's alternative school for 30 days and told she could have faced criminal charges.

Like thousands of other students around the country, she was caught by surveillance equipment that schools have installed to crack down on [electronic cigarettes](#), often without informing students.

Schools nationwide have invested millions of dollars in the monitoring technology, including federal COVID-19 emergency relief money meant to help schools through the pandemic and aid students' academic recovery. Marketing materials have noted the sensors, at a cost of over \$1,000 each, could help fight the virus by checking air quality.

E-cigarettes have inundated middle and high schools. The devices can dispense vapor containing higher concentrations of nicotine than tobacco cigarettes. Millions of minors [report vaping](#) despite efforts to limit sales to kids by raising the legal age to 21 and ban flavored products preferred by teenagers.

Some districts pair the sensors with surveillance cameras. When activated by a vaping sensor, those cameras can capture every student leaving the bathroom.

It can surprise students that schools even have such technology. Iglesias, who graduated in May from Tyler High School in Tyler, Texas, first learned it had sensors after an administrator came into a restroom as students started vaping.

"I was in awe," Iglesias said. The administrator tried to figure out who was involved but ultimately let all the students go.

The episode that got her in trouble happened elsewhere in Texas, at Athens High School, where her debate team was competing last February. Iglesias went into a bathroom to vape. Later that day, her coach told her she had been caught.

"I decided to partake in something that I'm not proud of, but I did it," Iglesias said, adding that her senior year was a stressful time and a close relative of hers was about to come out of jail. "I had had a lot of personal stuff building up outside."

She immediately was pulled from the debate tournament and her coach told her she could face charges because she was 18. She was sent to her district's alternative school for 30 days, which was the minimum punishment for students caught vaping under Tyler schools' [zero-tolerance policy](#).

Students found vaping also can receive a misdemeanor citation and be fined up to \$100. Students found with vapes containing THC, the chemical that makes marijuana users feel high, can be arrested on felony charges. At least 90 students in Tyler have faced misdemeanor or felony charges.

The Tyler district declined to comment on the disciplinary actions, saying in a written statement that tracking of vape usage addresses a problem that is hurting children's health.

"The vape detectors have been efficient in detecting when students are vaping, allowing us to address the issue immediately," the school system said.

A leading provider, HALO Smart Sensors, sells 90% to 95% of its sensors to schools. The sensors don't have cameras or record audio but can detect increases in noise in a school bathroom and send a text alert to school officials, said Rick Cadiz, vice president of sales and marketing for IPVideo, the maker of the HALO sensors.

The sensors are marketed primarily for detecting vape smoke or THC but also can monitor for sounds such as gunshots or keywords indicating possible bullying.

"What we're seeing with the districts is they're stopping the vaping in the schools with this, but then we don't want a \$1,000 paperweight that the school invests for no other uses, right?" Cadiz said. "We want it to be a long-term investment."

During the pandemic, HALO noted on its website that monitoring indoor air quality was an approved use for federal COVID relief money.



In this April 23, 2014 file photo, a man smokes an electronic cigarette in Chicago. Schools around the country are installing sensors and cameras to crack down on student vaping, and handing out harsh punishments for many who are caught. Schools have invested millions of dollars in the surveillance technology, including federal COVID-19 emergency relief money meant to help schools through the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh, File

"With the HALO Smart Sensor, you can combat COVID-19 in your schools and create a safe work and learning environment, while also reaping the benefits of vape detection, security monitoring, and more," the company said.

Schools now also can use some of the nearly \$440 million Juul Labs is paying to settle a lawsuit claiming it marketed its products to youth,

Cadiz said.

The company is aware of privacy concerns around the sensors, Cadiz said.

"All it's doing is alerting that something's going on," he said. "You need someone to physically investigate the alert that comes out."

The sensors do not always work as administrators hope.

At San Dieguito Union High School District in California, the vape smoke was so thick in bathrooms some students found it unbearable. In a pilot program, the district installed vape sensors in bathrooms and cameras outside the doors.

"In a way it was too successful," said Michael Allman, a district board member who explained the sensors went off so frequently that administrators felt it was useless to review security footage each time.

On social media, students around the country describe ways to outsmart the sensors. Some report covering them in plastic wrap. Others say they blow the smoke into their clothes.

At the Coppell Independent School District in Texas, sensors are part of a prevention strategy that includes educational videos and a tip line. Students can receive \$50 for reporting vaping by peers and "they were turning each other in right and left," said Jennifer Villines, the district's director of student and staff services.

Students can be sent to an alternative school or serve in-school suspensions but are not expelled for vaping, she said.

"We want our kids here. If they're not here, they're not learning,"

Villines said. "We also feel like in some cases, behaviors such as these are coping mechanisms, and we want to keep them in our environment where they learn to self-regulate."

The consequences for Iglesias included having to step down as student council president and debate captain and leaving the National Honor Society. At the alternative school where she spent a month, students do regular coursework but do not attend classes and are not guaranteed to have the materials included in their normal classes.

Iglesias was still able to attend prom, walk at graduation and stay in most of her clubs. She also kept her college scholarship and now attends Tyler Junior College.

For her, the punishments for vaping have gone too far.

"The people that make these policies and implement these things sit in a room and do not walk the campuses or see the results, the consequences to these policies that they're making to actually ensure that it's working, because it's not," Iglesias said. "I'm never going to do something like that again, because the repercussions I faced were horrible."

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