

Belleville BOE votes to designate smoke-free zones at schools

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The Belleville Board of Education voted at its most recent meeting to establish smoke-free zones in the Belleville school district. The resolution passed by a 3-1 count on Oct. 19, and will now be sent to the Belleville Township Council, with a request to approve the measure and put it into effect at its next regular meeting.

The resolution would make it unlawful for Belleville students at both the elementary and secondary school levels to use cigarettes or other tobacco products, or even have them in plain public view, on school grounds. The smoke-free school zone would extend within 1,000 feet of any Belleville school building, and would be in effect on school days from one hour before class or other school activities began, to one hour after they ended. Under the resolution, a police officer could issue summonses to offenders not more than 30 days after he or she reasonably believed that the resolution had been violated. Penalties would come in the form of a fine and/or community service. Money from the fines would help fund DARE or related programs.

Belleville Superintendent of Schools Richard Tomko said that the no-smoking law had become a common one that had already been adopted by some other municipalities. He also said that students were not permitted to smoke on a school campus. The rule would include vaping and e-cigarettes, and would also apply to parents who were in the smoke-free zone as well.

Prior to the resolution's passage, board trustee Ralph Vellon expressed "serious concerns" about it, and asked that it be tabled. He felt the decree would empower police to hover over Belleville schoolchildren and enforce the law upon them. He also said that students were being sent to school to be watched over by educators and not law enforcement, which could be quick to punish for infractions.

"I'm not comfortable with that," said Vellon.

He said he understood the law, but explained that students were learning and would make mistakes while growing up.

"I don't want this to turn into criminal offenses," said Vellon. "I think we should hold off and discuss this."

He said adults got away with things like smoking, but not schoolchildren, and also said the topic could be revisited later on.

"This is a proactive step the board must take, to tell the mayor and council we need their support," said Tomko.

At least one member of the public challenged the measure during the public portion of the meeting that was reserved for comments about items listed on the school board agenda. Belleville resident Georgeann Polite said the smoke-free zone around the schools should extend to adults along with students, including administrators, and teachers.

"Secondhand smoke is just as damaging," she said.

Tomko said that those individuals who desired to smoke would have to do so away from school buildings. The school district could not altogether stop adults from smoking.

"This is definitely a proactive step," reiterated Tomko.

Vellon's motion to table the ordinance was not seconded by another member of the board. The measure ultimately passed by gaining affirmative votes from board president Raymond Kuebler, vice-president Jeanne Lombardi, and trustee Peter Zangari, Jr., while Vellon cast the sole vote against it.

The Belleville Township Council is slated to meet next Tuesday night, but it was not readily apparent if the board's smoke-free zone resolution is on the council's agenda.

The Belleville school board's own next regular meeting is scheduled for Nov. 16 at 7 p.m. at Belleville High School.

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/belleville-boe-votes-to-designate-smoke-free-zones-at-schools-1.1438973>