

**Northern Territory Principals' Association
Submission - Electronic Cigarettes and Personal Vaporisers (Vaping)**

NTPA is recognised as the voice of school leadership in the NT and represents the interests of principals, assistant principals from all schools across the NT. We are the collective voice of school leaders at both a Territory and National level and a key stakeholder and advisory body to the Department of Education and Minister of Education. We represent 153 schools and 33,000 students in the NT.

NTPA welcomes this parliamentary inquiry into the use of Electronic Cigarettes and Personal Vaporisers (Vaping). School leaders have seen a growing and concerning increasing trend of the use of vapes and e-cigarettes for over two years. In fact, most school leaders are not having to deal with cigarettes at school, as vapes have taken over as the preferred product. The regularity of finding students with vapes is weekly, however there is great concern that this is more frequent as a vape can be easily concealed and not easily identifiable.

Students find vapes accessible, affordable and trendy. Students easily obtain vapes from black market sales i.e. older students or strangers selling them over social media such as Snapchat or Instagram. Students have told us that on Facebook they can put in a 'code' to find sellers of vapes. A common public meeting place (sometimes the school grounds) is identified with an unknown person to the student which can put them at risk for their personal safety. School leaders are staggered at how easy it is to secure vape products. Price is usually @\$50 which students see as more affordable than cigarettes and alcohol. We have also heard instances where an adult asks their children to take vapes to school to sell to other students. Students are also targeted without provocation via social media and sent messages to buy a vape (peer group pressure).

Vapes are attractive and seen as trendy on social media and through peer groups. They are marketed to attract young people as gadgets, trendy flavouring and cartoon style images. Students have a lack of knowledge of the dangers of using an e-cigarettes or vapes. They feel that the vape provides them with a 'buzz' making it highly addictive. Students frequently make comments they are safe and a healthy alternative to smoking. Vapes are flavoured to target young people who have no knowledge that it is illegal and harmful, or that it contains nicotine. Effective, targeted marketing supports their misbelief that they are not harmful.

School leaders have found that parents have little understanding of the dangers of vaping or the risks that this leads to smoking addictions. Parents have commented that these are a healthy alternative to smoking and are often mislead believing that they are 'therapeutic' and do not contain nicotine. Parents are not aware of how their children obtain vapes illegally. School leaders hear of instances where students request money from their parents for food or canteen sales but actually use the money to buy vapes.

School leaders are very concerned that the problem of vaping is going to become overwhelming for secondary school students as a social, emotional and health issue. The implications for schools have been that the students who already struggle to access the school program are often the students who vape. They become addicted and their problem of absences becomes exacerbated. They intimidate other students wanting to use the bathrooms, as they become hang outs for kids with behavioural challenges. It is undoubtedly the precursor behaviour to other substance abuse such as smoking, stimulants, alcohol etc.

Addressing the mental health and wellbeing issues of our young people is a growing concern for school leaders. This has escalated particularly after the pandemic years. Vaping only exacerbates a student's mental health and wellbeing due to the highly addictive nature of vaping.

School leaders have witnessed students with vaping (nicotine) addictions so serious that it impacts on school attendance and engagement. That is, they can only stay at school for a few hours as they need to go home to have a 'fix'. The other concern is that vaping addiction is contributing to a student's mental health and wellbeing. For example, they do not feel like they have control over their addiction and ability to self regulate. As well it impacts on their ability to engage in sport and play to the level they are capable of. Students who have been elites in their sport soon realise that they no longer can play at the elite level.

It is harder to identify a student who has been vaping as the smell is not distinguishable. Students will often spray deodorant after vaping to conceal any signs of vapour. Schools have invested financially in vape/smoking detectors to recognise vaping in toilets which is costly and not affordable to many schools and not fail safe. They only really work when a camera system is linked to identifying people exiting the bathrooms when an alarm goes off.

Despite investing in these detectors which can identify vaping in toilets, students have found ways to address this by vaping into the toilet bowl then flushing the toilet to draw the vapour down rather than reaching the ceiling where the vape detector is located.

Addressing the issue of vaping is becoming an additional workload issue for school leaders. Time is consumed to investigate students who have bring vapes to school, inhale, distribute and sell in schools; time is spent following up with conversations and education with/for parents and negotiating consequences and further education for a student.

Like other drug and alcohol education program, teachers explicitly teach students about the dangers of vaping and health risks. The lack of public education contributes to students misunderstanding of the use of vapes. Education occurs at a whole class level, in small groups with students who have a vaping addiction or misused vapes and for individual students and their families. Teachers, school leaders, school-based health promoting nurses, school counsellors, school-based police auxiliaries, Clontarf and Stars mentors all play a role in the education of vaping for students and their families.

Recommendations:

A massive parent and public education campaign and real tools and real curriculum in schools is a necessity. The biggest part of the campaign has to focus on what are the health implications, as everybody is espousing that this behaviour is low impact on one's health, there seems to be a lack of seriousness about it. This is similar to what we experienced several years ago with a somewhat blasé attitude from multiple groups, including the authorities about marijuana usage. The adolescent brain is such a pliable and malleable organ there is no doubt that by vaping the foundations for substance abuse are being developed.

Curriculum resources specific to the effects of vaping, addiction and health consequences.

Resourcing schools with smoke detectors in toilets and school wide security cameras.

School leaders believe the best regulatory response is to ban these across the country. We are yet to see the full impact of the cost of vaping to our young people and communities.