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Testimony SB 355

I am currently the president of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. We have over 17,000 members, and this is one topic I am confident would have unanimous support from them. Our organization is teaming up with the campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and the National Association of School Nurses to keep our children nicotine-free.

I started my job as principal at Arrowhead High School more than 28 years ago. At that time, like most schools, Arrowhead had a significant problem with students smoking on the grounds. Gradually the problem started reducing and dropped significantly in the early 2000s. We fought the good battle and got kids to stop smoking.

I thought we were done with the nicotine fight, but we started seeing vaping pop up in our school. We quickly realized this was a severe problem that was not going away. The first indication of how addictive vaping is and how serious a problem we had was when student-athletes who had devoted much of their youth to a specific sport were getting caught vaping in school, which resulted in a suspension from their sport. These students were caught vaping so many times that they lost all eligibility to play their loved sport. Feeding their addiction to nicotine was more critical than their passion for their sport.

This practice is so addictive that students will vape in the classroom, lunchroom, hallway, or bathroom. When asked why they do this, the typical answer is that it calms them down and relieves their stress. In reality, all they are doing is staving off withdrawal symptoms by putting more nicotine into their body. According to the National Youth Tobacco Survey in 2013, only 4.5% of all teenagers had vaped in the past 30 days. In 2020, 20.5% of all teenagers reported vaping in the previous month, equating to 3.6 million kids using e-cigarettes, including 1 in 5 high school students. Even with evidence that vaping is harmful, students are still doing it at a significant rate. We do not know the long-term effects of vaping on an adolescent body; I wonder how many 25-year-olds will carry an oxygen tank like a two-pack-a-day 80-year-old with emphysema.

“How are students getting this stuff?” is a common question I hear. One of my students got his 19-year-old brother to legally buy vaping devices, which he then sold to his friends and classmates for a 100% markup on the cost. Young people go online and check the “Are you 18 Box” yes, enabling them to order any device or vape oil they want. The vape oils are marketed with flavors like gummy bear, cotton candy, mint, and watermelon to a younger audience. There are currently over 15,000 kid-friendly flavors of e-cigarettes on the market, most of which are known to appeal to kids. It appears as though these companies try to lure the youngsters in flavors that appeal to kids, which keeps them coming back due to their nicotine addiction. The devices are getting smaller and more easily concealed -- they look like everyday items such as pens or flash drives. When you think about it, who needs to hide their vaping habit? Not the adult trying to quit smoking, but the kid who doesn’t want their parents to find out.

E-cigarettes expose kids to HUGE doses of nicotine, with a single Juul containing as much nicotine as a whole pack of 20 cigarettes. There is significant research on how nicotine negatively affects the developing adolescent brain, specifically attention, learning, and memory. It is no surprise that we see our academic scores going down around the state, with over a quarter of our students vaping regularly.

At Arrowhead, we trained high school students to return to their middle school to share the dangers of vaping with the 6th, 7th, and 8th graders so we can stop them before they start. In addition, I have presented the risks of vaping to parents from the seven feeder schools to help them fight the battle at home.

Principals get into the profession to help students learn and impact the education of our youth. Unfortunately, they are spending way too much time tackling the vaping problem when there are other things they could be doing. We are allowing companies to make billions of dollars with no regard for the health of our youth and the future health of our country.

I ask that you help us help the youth of this state by passing SB 355.

I brought some confiscated devices from our students; I would like to show them to you.