

Vaping - An inquiry into reducing rates of e-cigarette use in Queensland

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Submission –

VAPING – an inquiry into reducing rates of e-cigarette use in Queensland.

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The Queensland Secondary Principals' Association (QSPA) would like to thank the Health and Environment Committee of the Queensland Parliament for the opportunity to provide a submission to, *VAPING – an inquiry into reducing rates of e-cigarette use in Queensland*.

QSPA is the professional organisation representing Government secondary Principals, Deputy Principals and Heads of Department. QSPA members are represented in more than 90% of state secondary schools in all parts of the state; metropolitan, regional, rural and remote ranging in size from several hundred to our largest schools of over 3000 students. Throughout this submission, where the term 'Principal' is used it should be read as encompassing all secondary school leaders as listed previously.

The prevalence of vaping in Queensland state secondary schools is in line with that of the wider community and has been on the increase for several years. This submission seeks to provide the Committee with information drawn from the daily lived experience of secondary school leaders. It will canvas the accessibility of e-cigarettes by students, the level of e-cigarette use in schools, the impact of e-cigarette use on learning and school routine, the responses of schools and recommendations for the future.

Accessibility of e-cigarettes to Queensland young people

E-cigarettes and associated products are readily available to students throughout the state from metropolitan Brisbane, in regional centres and as far as the remote communities dotted across Queensland. Schools report an ever-increasing number of retail outlets selling vaping products being set up within close proximity to schools or along popular travel routes for students. It is reported that students have little to no trouble either purchasing vaping materials themselves, as they are not asked to verify their age, or being able to ask a willing adult to undertake this exercise. Schools advise that they report local sellers/dealers who are supplying students to Queensland Police.

The online availability of vaping products is a significant contributor to the ease of access by young people. Young people, of any age, can access materials online and have them shipped to their home or another address. It is apparent that 'being caught' by parents, educators or other authorities holds little sway. If there is a fear of being caught, the establishment of another delivery location is easily organised.

Several schools report students purchasing products online and then reselling at a profit to those around them.

There is a growing 'vape currency', i.e., what students are prepared to do to provide funds for vaping. Schools report students selling their belongings, theft or completing tasks for vaping funds, e.g., homework or assignment completion. Occasionally these 'deals' for funds may sour with schools reporting acts of intimidation and/or verbal/physical aggression.

Advertisements for vaping products appear readily on billboards, various online platforms and across social media-all avenues where young people are target audiences. The marketing of vaping products is cleverly designed and hits its targeted audience with ease-it is contemporary and aimed at lulling young people and often their parents, into a belief that vapes are harmless and a necessary and attractive inclusion to a young person's life.

QSPA strongly supports the announcement by the Commonwealth to work with states and territories to:

- stop the import of non-prescription vapes;
- increase the minimum quality standards for vapes including by restricting flavours, colours, and other ingredients;
- require pharmaceutical-like packaging;
- reduce the allowed nicotine concentrations and volumes; and
- ban all single use, disposable vapes.

Closing down the sale of vapes in retail settings and ending vape sales in convenience stores will significantly impact the current ease with which e-cigarettes can be obtained by young people.

Recommendations

- The sale of e-cigarettes and associated products needs to be restricted, regulated and monitored.
- The marketing of vaping products should be restricted and include health warnings as with cigarettes.

E-Cigarette use in schools.

The growth of e-cigarette use among young people is evident in every secondary school who provided information for this submission. In some cases, schools report the growth of e-cigarette use to be at 'pandemic' levels. The ease of access, as described previously, is a major casual factor in the increasing use of e-cigarettes by young people.

Vapes are easily concealed on a person. It appears they have been designed and marketed purposely to allow them to blend in and make detection more difficult. Vapes are produced that look like pens, highlighters and other assorted items that at first glance look innocuous. Schools report students hiding vapes inside their clothing knowing they are safe from being 'searched'.

Responses by schools include education, proactive building design/modification and reactive consequences.

In the absence of a co-ordinated community education campaign (although greater information is now becoming more readily available on the dangers of vaping) schools have worked hard to educate their students, staff, parents and the wider community on the dangers of e-cigarette use.

See Appendix One for an example resource.

Many schools provide regular information sessions to whole school assemblies and/or individual cohorts. Schools have embedded information relating to the dangers of e-cigarettes within various aspects of the curriculum, mostly within the junior secondary, Years 7-9.

Schools have introduced information signage, physically and digitally, to increase the reach of this important health message.

Schools have engaged, wherever possible, support from health professionals and Queensland Police to support the delivery of information and awareness activities for students, parents and the wider community. Access to health professionals with the capacity to assist in the delivery of education campaigns is reported as difficult in rural and remote Queensland. Quality assured online and other resources have been hard to come by, although schools report this is improving.

Schools understand that tackling the increasing use of e-cigarettes requires firstly an understanding of the dangers associated with this practice. Community education is seen by schools as the single most effective tool in addressing this issue. Parents regularly report to schools that they 'didn't believe vapes are dangerous', or 'didn't know that vaping is harmful'.

Impact of e-cigarette use on learning and school routine.

As the use of e-cigarettes continues almost unabated, schools are reporting evidence of vaping addiction and associated impacts on student learning and school routine. Schools report students expressing their 'need' to vape throughout the day; they report students presenting as distracted, agitated and at times aggressive when they are unable to access a regular 'fix' during the school day. In the 'perfect world' of a student vaper, their day would be punctuated by regular vaping opportunities, to and from school and at break times, within the school toilets, or other areas of the school. Schools report students also seeking to leave class to vape. In some cases, students can understand and acknowledge their addiction and the withdrawal symptoms they suffer when they can't vape.

Schools report introducing a range of mechanisms to better supervise student movement during the day. Toilet passes, the locking of certain amenities blocks and closer supervision of toilets are three examples of methods introduced in schools to minimise opportunity for students to leave class and use e-cigarettes.

Anecdotally, schools report decreased levels of concentration and application in students who vape regularly. Their focus is on their next 'vape' and the organisation around that. It is not unreasonable to assume that this will lead to reduced learning outcomes for this cohort of students.

Responses of schools

The prevalence of daily vaping in schools has been met in a variety of ways additional to the ongoing awareness raising and education campaigns outlined previously.

Schools report attempting to reduce opportunities for students to vape. School amenities blocks are the most popular location for vaping. While this in itself is an issue, a secondary problem is the number of students who refrain from using the amenities throughout an entire day due to the prevalence of vaping and the fumes generated. Students using the amenities for legitimate reasons report 'passive vaping' as they walk through a vape filled facility. Students also report fear of using toilets during the school day in case they are asked to identify students present who are vaping. There is a fear of retribution or possible consequences if it is perceived they too are vaping. Students unwilling or afraid to use toilets during the day is an unhealthy and unwanted outcome of vaping in schools.

Schools, with available funds, have sought to build or retrofit amenities blocks to ensure their design is less accommodating to vaping to reduce its occurrence. Cubicles still provide appropriate privacy for students however wash basin and entry/exit points are made more open for observation and less inviting for students meeting up to obtain/exchange/use e-cigarettes. This is a costly exercise and not one available to all schools. In many cases there is student/parent/media pushback on the redesign of amenities blocks with the mistaken belief that student privacy is being jeopardised. In all cases reported by schools, extensive education of parents and students has shifted sentiment to support changes to amenities design that make vaping less attractive and encourage appropriate use of the facilities.

Increased supervision of students during break times and between classes when student movement occurs is a strategy employed in all schools that provided input to this submission. Teaching staff in secondary schools undertake supervision during break times. In many schools this allocation is already at maximum capacity; additional duty times for teachers would deny them their industrially agreed lunch break. Thus, in most of the schools reporting, this additional supervision falls to members of the school Executive - the Principal or Deputy Principals. For short term, emergent issues, this additional workload can be justified. In the long-term it is impracticable and untenable and takes the school leadership away from their core business.

Perhaps the most telling example of the impact of vaping on school resources is the number of schools actively investigating the installation of vape detectors. There are several vape detecting products on the market; all are costly, and schools report their effectiveness can be hampered through the spraying of hair spray adjacent to the detection sensors. The use of vaping detectors relies on staff being able to respond to an alarm in a timely manner, again putting pressure on the allocation of school resources.

Schools report that in most cases education is used as the first response when a student is caught caping or with vaping materials. This may include the involvement of the School Based Youth Health Nurse (where there is one) or completing of an appropriate health education program. Continued incidences result in consequences that may range from internal detention to suspension from school for a period of days. Evidence exists from schools that the use of e-cigarettes by students has

contributed significantly to an increase in School Disciplinary Absences (SDA). In some cases, schools report students receiving an SDA for vaping who have never received a behaviour consequence for anything prior during their enrolment.

Suspension is not a long-term viable solution to vaping in schools; Principals understand this, however right now they feel that there are very few alternatives available to them to address this growing crisis.

Consideration must also be given to a preferred future where community understanding into the dangers of vaping is stronger, where the use of e-cigarettes by young people is reducing. We need to be conscious of a possible unintended consequence that may result in young people moving back to traditional cigarettes/nicotine; not a situation any of us would welcome.

Recommendations:

- Governments to fund, fast track and publish necessary research into the impacts of vaping on the development of young people and their futures.
- Conduct a serious, hard-hitting education campaign about the health risks associated with vaping; this campaign to be high profile and evident across all media - traditional and social - platforms.
- Expand the development of age-appropriate resources to highlight the dangers of e-cigarettes, their impact on the physical, mental and social development of young people.

Conclusion

The use of e-cigarettes is a societal issue, a challenge that impacts communities across the state. It is not limited by location, gender nor socio-economic capacity. It exists in families, sporting organisations, companies and in schools. Its use and impact is wide-spread and not well understood. It is with this in mind that any solutions must be broad based and involve all in the community. It cannot be the responsibility of schools alone to address this issue.

QSPA welcomes the opportunity for continued conversation on this important issue.



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