

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

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Submitted by: [REDACTED]
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Inquiry Into E-Cigarettes/Vaping: Submission:

I am writing to express my personal concern with vaping as an epidemic in schools as a 17-year-old member of my high school community and 11th grader. The use of e-cigarettes has increased by over 40% from 2018 (Medical Journey of Australia, 2022) and over 14.5% of teenagers under 18 are reported to have vaped (Tobacco in Australia, 2023).

This submission also addresses the shortcomings with Australia's proposed vaping import ban which bans the importation of non-prescription vaping products including those not containing nicotine. However, this policy is not enough to substantially reduce or eliminate the vaping epidemic in schools which even affects those as young as 10. To efficiently reduce this substantial issue, this submission will also propose a potential multi-faceted and comprehensive program to issue in schools to reduce this epidemic.

I. The Issues Arising with a Complete Ban on Vapes:

Banning vapes can potentially do more harm than good, as 99% of all vaping products contain nicotine, even those that claim to be 'nicotine free' (Single Care, 2023). Nicotine is highly addictive and is proven to be as addictive as cocaine or heroin and may possibly be more addictive (John Hopkins Medicine, 2023) and lead to many young people (mainly schoolchildren) developing a nicotine dependence which makes it more difficult for them to quit smoking. Young people who vape also commonly go through withdrawal and may be at risk of developing addictions to other substances which may be more harmful, such as cocaine. Therefore, a complete ban on vapes for the youth without providing assistance for withdrawal and potential relapses is not highly appropriate or effective.

Additionally, more than half of e-cigarette users use them as a coping mechanism (Truth Initiative, 2023), which is especially relevant with the 5.5% increase in mental health challenges encountered by teenagers (Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 2023), which is often not appropriately addressed in schools and may result in addiction to other substances as a coping mechanism to replace vapes which creates a new issue in itself. For individuals who vape for the variety of flavours available, a restriction on flavouring can also have severely negative implications, as more teenagers may be motivated to smoke conventional tobacco cigarettes.

II. The Suggested Solution of a Potential State-wide Program to Reduce and Eliminate the Issue of Vaping in Schools:

I urge you to consider the implementation of a state-wide program to work towards reducing and eliminating the incidents of vaping with schoolchildren. My proposed program is the Vape Action and Awareness Program (VAAP) which will primarily focus on providing education about vapes to not only students, but teachers and parents as well.

Approximately 37% of parents believe that e-cigarettes must be safe due to their role to reduce smoking and are not aware of the real health risks of vaping, especially with young people (RCH National Child Health Poll, 2023). Education regarding vape and vape safety has had positive and successful results on schoolchildren who vape, as it ensures that all parties, including the students, parents, and teachers, are aware of the health risks and are able to make informed decisions regarding vapes. In conjunction with this, it is advised that schools increase the number of GPs and wellbeing hubs equipped with mental health professionals potentially through funding. This action also assists young children struggling with mental health issues which, in turn, decreases the incidents of vaping, as vaping is also caused by peer pressure and the need for social acceptance and students vape as a coping mechanism (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023). To maximise the effectiveness of this action, schools would also need to increase the promotion of mental health and wellbeing hubs to reduce social stigma and create a supportive environment which would encourage at-risk students to seek assistance with their mental health issues, which is a prominent issue by itself, and consequently vaping problems. Although wellbeing and mental health discussions are a mandatory part of the Australian curriculum, this could be improved with an increased student voice to allow for the discussion of relevant and severe issues within the community, such as vaping, and increased action by staff to educate and support students undergoing challenges with mental health and wellbeing.

The VAAP would also focus on the provision and promotion of nicotine replacement products such as flavoured lozenges and sprays to replace vapes and decrease nicotine addiction in young individuals. Over 52% of teenagers who vape have unsuccessfully attempted to quit vaping an average of 4.8 times (National Institute of Health, 2023), as nicotine addiction is such a severe issue, however, nicotine replacement works to gradually eliminate the incidents of vaping in schools. This practice is also safe and not a health risk, as vapes produce ultrafine particles that can be inhaled deep in the lungs and result in lung disease in conjunction with harmful chemicals from flavourings such as diacetyl. In order for this to work effectively, schools must provide their students access to counselling from aforementioned wellbeing hub counsellors who can monitor their progress in reducing their intake of vapes and assist them with withdrawal symptoms and other associated mental health problems. Although this may be an issue for schools located in more rural areas without access to counsellors for students, an online program can be established to ensure that vaping is reduced in schools everywhere across Australia and that these children receive appropriate mental health assistance which can also prevent the use of vapes in the future.

III. Other Issues and Suggestions with the Vape Epidemic in Schools:

One of the largest issues with the vape epidemic in schools is the lack of restrictions and regulations for vapes, especially for online retailers, as it is very easy to obtain a vape without ID checks. While a complete ban on vapes without providing assistance for struggling young people is not advisable, I would recommend increased control and regulations over vape markets due to the ease of selling to young people. It is crucially important that vapes become limited or reduced in supply with the support of the VAAP, as nicotine replacements and vape alternatives can be promoted more effectively to completely eliminate the incidents of vaping in schools and the education program can also

be utilised more effectively to lower demand and prevent the incidents of vaping. It is also advisable that instead of fear campaigns specifically targeted towards the youth, campaigns are created to reduce peer pressure in schools and improve students' mental health and wellbeing to promote a supportive school culture which should reduce the incidents of vaping.