




Speech By  
**Laura Gerber**

**MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN**

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## **TOBACCO AND OTHER SMOKING PRODUCTS (VAPING) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Mrs GERBER** (Currumbin—LNP) (6.53 pm): Vaping, particularly in our schools, is incredibly concerning. I have spoken with many parents concerned about vaping in our schools, I have spoken with many teachers who are really trying to help young people and teach them how to practise healthy habits, and I have spoken to many doctors who are trying to highlight the magnitude of the problem.

In 2019, this was the situation: according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 9.6 per cent of people aged 14 to 17 in Australia were using e-cigarettes. Queensland was ranked the second highest Australian jurisdiction for its vaping use. That was in 2019. By 2022, the number of young people aged between 14 and 17 who were using e-cigarettes or vaping nearly tripled, to 28 per cent, and 49 per cent of people aged 18 to 24 in Australia reported having used an e-cigarette or a vape at least once in their lifetime. This was the highest of all age groups. Now, new data released just hours ago shows that 35.6 per cent of Queensland young people aged 12 to 17 have tried a vape. Needless to say, it is definitely an issue our community is acutely aware of and concerned about, not only with the rapid uptake of vaping by our kids but also with the adverse health effects and the harms that we do not yet fully appreciate.

In her second reading speech the minister spoke about the number of suspensions our schools have given for kids who are vaping. I note that recommendation 6 of the committee report recommends the Department of Education and Queensland Health prepare guidelines for all Queensland schools on interventions such as interactive online courses that can be used as alternative education for students found vaping or with vaping products rather than using punitive outcomes such as suspensions.

I wish to draw members' attention to the wonderful work that my local state high school, Elanora State High School, is doing in the electorate of Currumbin to combat vaping, work that it has been doing for over two years now. Elanora State High School is ahead of the game with its anti-vaping program, which involves an intensive vaping education program that has seen highly effective results. Principal Rochelle Lewis developed the program in 2022 because, like many other schools, Elanora State High School had a zero-tolerance approach to vaping and students caught vaping were immediately suspended. In Elanora State High School, this resulted in 52 students being suspended and a huge plumbing bill due to students flushing their vapes down the toilet to avoid being caught. Ms Lewis told me that in her 23 years of being an educator she had never encountered a problem like vaping.

She took action. Principal Lewis, parents and teachers came together concerned that suspension was not working to deter kids from vaping, and the sheer number of suspensions was not something the school could sustain or wanted to be doing. An educational approach was preferable to ensure young people were informed of the dangers of vaping—a preventive approach rather than a reactive approach like suspending.

I have heard other members in this chamber during this debate talk about how the education minister needs to help schools develop programs to prevent the scourge of vaping. Listen up. Elanora State High School has been doing it for two years with amazing results. This is their program. Firstly,

all students are involved in the first stage of the process, which is a 70-minute education session on how harmful vaping is, the different forms of peer pressure and how students can self-regulate. Next, if a student is caught vaping they have to complete a two-week anti-vaping program, which they must complete during their lunchbreaks. Then if a student is again caught vaping, the third tier in the school's anti-vaping program is that the student must complete individual education sessions for a month with a youth drugs and alcohol service and the school nurse.

Elanora State High School's targeted anti-vaping program has resulted in not only greater awareness amongst students about the health impacts of vaping but also a significant reduction in suspensions for vaping and, since its implementation—and this is probably the most important part—a significant reduction in kids vaping at the school. In 2023, following the implementation of the program, there were no suspensions recorded for vaping and 16 students were involved in the third tier of the school's intensive educational program. So far this year there has been only one recorded suspension for vaping and no students have been required to attend the third tier of the school's intensive anti-vaping program.

The lowered prevalence of vaping and the school's measured approach have also resulted in a reduction in damage to the toilet facilities. The lower maintenance costs have allowed the school to use its funding for more important means like educating our children for their futures. It is clearly evident that my wonderful Elanora State High School program is working, and I am so proud of principal Rochelle Lewis and the work she is doing in that high school, putting in place this successful preventive program well before this government decided to take action.

Let's talk about primary schools. The shadow education minister highlighted that, in primary schools, suspension for substance misconduct, which includes vaping, has skyrocketed by over 450 per cent. As a parent of primary school kids—and I talk to other parents at my primary school who feel the same way—this is extremely concerning. Every parent has a right to be extremely concerned about that alarming, skyrocketing rate of vaping in our primary schools.

The LNP recognises that vaping and illicit drug use is a huge problem in our primary schools and that it includes the younger generation of Queenslanders. What did the former Labor education minister say a few years ago about vaping? She sensationally claimed that vaping was 'no worse than smoking cigarettes when she was at school'—comments she had to walk back from. She has now conceded that vaping is an epidemic in our schools. From the estimates hearing, we know that this government has not invested any money in programs for our primary schools to specifically address vaping in our primary schools. Is it any wonder that they have not invested that money when the former Labor education minister initially talked down the vaping problem in our schools? Now years later, when vaping is an epidemic, we are debating a bill which Queensland could have taken the lead on years ago if they had listened to our schools, our teachers and the LNP.

I now turn to the part of this bill that deals with illegal tobacco supply. The bill increases the current penalties for people who supply and possess illegal tobacco as part of a business activity known in our community as chop-chop. Queenslanders have had laws to prohibit the illegal sale of tobacco for a while but, even with these existing laws, the sale of tobacco is flourishing. Why? Because it is not enough to pass laws. Surprise, surprise—you need to have a government that enforces those laws. It is this enforcement action that is lacking. A network of shops on the Gold Coast is selling black market tobacco, or chop-chop, as part of a nationwide racket which we know is largely organised by crime syndicates. Illegal tobacco is often used to test smuggling routes. This denies the community legitimate tax revenue and it undercuts small businesses that are doing the right thing. Further, the government was previously warned that its laws were not strong enough by health professionals, by the former Health and Environment Committee and by the opposition. They were warned that their illicit tobacco laws were not sufficient.

Back in 2021, the Australian Association of Convenience Stores said 'existing legislation was not fit for purpose when it comes to deterring operators from selling illegal tobacco'. It has taken this government three years to act. Once again, we are debating this bill and talking to its enforcement and new offence provisions. We urge the government that they are only as good as the enforcement action they are prepared to take. We can only urge the government to address the critical enforcement issues in relation to chop-chop and the illegal supply of tobacco because they are run by organised crime and they are rife in our communities. The lack of enforcement action by this government has allowed chop-chop and illegal tobacco to thrive in our communities. The time it has taken for this government to act is just another example of why we need to change the government. The only way to end Labor's chaos and crisis is to change the government on 26 October and show Labor the door in 2024.

*(Time expired)*