

# Support for SB 89 – E-Cigs

March 29, 2023

Hi,

My name is Evan Kopperud. I am a lifelong Alaskan, and social studies teacher at Palmer High School. This is currently my 5<sup>th</sup> year as a certified teacher in the state, and 8<sup>th</sup> year in classrooms overall. This is in regards to your request for educator insight on vaping in our public schools.

1. **Are you witnessing E-Cig use by young people in your school(s) or community?**
2. **Do you believe E-Cig use by young people is on the rise?**

Yes and yes. At this point I believe it would be fair to say that vaping among teenagers in Alaska is reaching "crisis level", and I don't use that phrase lightly. For some students, it is still just a social activity done on occasion or when the opportunity presents itself (similar to, *let's say*, marijuana), but unfortunately for a growing number of kids we're talking about straight-up nicotine addiction. That includes everything that comes along with addiction; withdrawals, irritability, manipulateness, anxiety, depression and shame. This has exacerbated what is already an active mental health crisis that we've been navigating with students since the return to school after COVID shutdowns.

Over this past school year I've been able to have a lot of candid conversations with students on their own observations about vaping here at Palmer High, and this is a recap of essentially what I've heard numerous times:

- Kids are getting introduced to vapes as early as 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade in some cases, but almost every student has witnessed vaping in a school bathroom by at least their first year of middle school.
- **While these are anecdotal estimates, and only that**, the consensus I've gotten from talking with dozens of students is that the overwhelming majority of them have taken a vape hit at least once - 70-90% range. Those who vape on a semi-regular or regular basis are in the 30-40% range. And between 10-30% of students can't get through the school day without vaping at least once (full-blown addiction). I've also routinely heard students say that staff and administrators are completely oblivious/naive to just how many kids are vaping on a regular basis.
- There was a huge uptick in vaping during COVID, and that's where many kids went from it being a social activity with friends to a solo activity, then into an addiction.
- **Students who vape are well aware it's not good for them**, and while they might brag about vaping in front of their peers, **almost anyone you talk to individually expresses a lot of shame over it**. They don't want to be addicted.
- **How are underage kids getting their vapes? The most often culprit is older students/siblings who recently graduated and is now 19 buying it for younger, former classmates**. Second most often is the child's parents buying it for them (sad, but unfortunately true). Third is less likely, but some students have actually used social media or Craigslist to reach out to strangers to buy it for them in kind of an online version of "*Hey mister*", like kids used to do back in the day outside of a liquor store.

I have noticed that for whatever reason, at least based on my personal observations in our school, vaping is something that seems to be more prevalent among female students than male students.

### 3. Do you believe E-Cigs are safe and harmless?

Obviously they *are not* safe and harmless. Nicotine is highly addictive and vaping is negatively impacting kids' breathing/lungs, etc. Students have mentioned how it makes it harder if you're playing a sport because you're just out of breath quicker.

Are they safer than traditional cigarettes? I'm not a scientist, so I won't posit on that -- although my gut feeling tells me they're even worse simply because of the levels of nicotine that can be taken in, and because it's so easy to just keep puffing on them all day long without really noticing.

What I will say is: it is definitely *not* helping our students who are already facing record-high levels of anxiety and depression.

### 4. Has your school or community taken action to counter E-Cig use and possession by young people?

As an educator I feel my role is to facilitate discussions with students and listen to what they have to say about it, and then advocate for that (like I am doing in this email response). **I think the most important factor the legislature needs to be aware of, is that, at least for high schoolers, the kids already know vaping is not good for them.** Schools already teach kids about the physical dangers of vaping in their health classes. **I think we need to accept that an alarmingly high amount of our youth in Alaska are already addicted to different degrees, and what we really need is holistic addiction counseling.**

But of course **I think making common-sense attempts to limit access are important as well.**

### 5. As with alcohol, do you support raising the legal age to buy, sell, or possess E-Cigs to age 21?

Absolutely, 100%. Will kids continue to find other ways to get a hold of vaping products? Yep. But at least talking with students, the number one source for buying them the products are 19 and 20-year old former classmates or siblings, who were in the immediate grades above them.

### 6. Do you support establishing a 25% sales tax on E-Cigs as a way to deter youth initiation?

Yes. While this is a punitive tax on adults who smoke E-Cigs, if it can serve as a deterrent and add additional revenue to our government, then I'm all for it. I'm not going to lose sleep at night that vape shops and Big Tobacco are going to lose out on revenue.

Thank you. Sorry for the long-winded response, but I have a lot of thoughts on this which is why I took the time to -- hopefully -- give a meaningful and insightful response.

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