

## **Vermont States School Nurses' Association Testimony**

### **S. 18 - An act relating to banning flavored tobacco products and e-liquids 2/23/24 Vermont House Committee on Ways and Means**

Good morning Vermont Representatives and all who have gathered today to share your valuable thoughts on S.18. My name is Kelly Landwehr. I am a Master's prepared Pediatric Nurse Practitioner, a School Nurse at Middlebury Union High School and the President of the Vermont State School Nurses Association. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of this important bill that will positively impact the physical and mental health of young people in Vermont. As a school nurse, I am dedicated to caring for, educating, supporting, protecting and advocating for the youth in my community and as the VSSNA President, I am dedicated to doing the same for all Vermont children. This is why I am here today.

I can't imagine that anyone here today wants harm to come to young people in Vermont. I can't imagine that anyone in this room thinks it is a good idea for young people to start using nicotine products. And I also can't imagine that anyone in this room would not want to protect our young people when we have the opportunity to do so. I anticipate that others testifying have or will touch upon the undeniable current data that shows young people are most likely to begin using nicotine-based products that taste and smell good and have minty, fruity, and other appealing flavors. We know that nicotine, tobacco, and e-liquids are unequivocally harmful to the brain and lungs of pre-teens, teens, and young adults. Teens and young adults are developmentally far more susceptible and vulnerable to becoming addicted to nicotine.

To prevent the harm caused by nicotine and tobacco we must make these products unavailable. This will help protect our Vermont youth. Restricting flavored nicotine products must be done. You have the power to do this.

As a school nurse, this is what I observe on a regular basis:

- Addiction to nicotine products becomes the priority
- Student education is interrupted because "seat time" in the classroom becomes limited as students skip class to use nicotine products.
- Students addicted to nicotine products reach out to the school nurse and to the substance use prevention specialist scared and wanting help

- Parents of children addicted to nicotine reach out, desperate to help their children
- Students are alarmed to feel their hearts racing and feel very anxious, restless, and unsettled. These students are frightened. When I assess the student, I discover they have just been vaping
- Students use social media to arrange meet-ups within the school to vape together
- Students who have started vaping seek help for a chronic cough or shortness of breath
- Students share their stories about starting to use nicotine products socially and quickly becoming addicted when they never intended to
- Students share that they didn't realize that vapes, e-cigarettes, and flavored cigars were harmful or addicting
- Students share that the ease of use and appealing flavors draw them to vaping and they are more likely to use nicotine products that taste and smell good
- Student-athletes with health effects interfering with playing the sports they love
- Students who have been diagnosed with irreversible lung conditions due to vaping

This is real and what I see every day. To those who oppose this bill, I want to hear and respect your opinions and reasons. But after witnessing first hand the physical and mental health effects of nicotine, tobacco and e-liquids and the grip that addiction takes on our kids, there is no argument or reasoning that is more important than doing everything in our power to pass this bill as a means to protect them.

What we are seeing in schools highlights a hidden cost of flavored nicotine products-the cost of education as students miss valuable classroom time feeding their addiction. This also results in needing to fund additional staff and resources needed in schools to track down students missing from class and the interventions required when students are caught vaping which often results in being suspended and missing even more academic time.

Our school district has been working with United Way of Addison County partnering to provide substance prevention education to our elementary students. Here is some information that they have asked me to share with you today:

### [Addison County Youth Survey Data:](#)

*In 2022, 12.4% or 99 out of 802 High School students in Addison County reported using electronic vapor products in the last 30 days. In 2023, the reported number of High Schoolers using electronic vapor products increased to 14.2% or 93 out of 652 students. We expect this percentage to rise again this year.*

### *Quotes and Observations from Addison County Youth:*

*During the past year, staff from United Way of Addison County have been presenting Vaping Prevention Education to elementary students, ages 8-11 in Addison County. When the students were prompted to discuss what they know about vaping products/e-cigarettes prior to the presentation, their number 1 response was that “they come in a lot of “yummy” flavors, “fun” colors, and “cool” shapes.” Most students are aware of these products at such a young age because they either have older siblings that partake or are influenced by peers with family members who partake in vaping.*

*During the presentation, the harms of nicotine on the brain, lungs, and heart are discussed and kids question why these products are made and sold in the first place. Additionally, the presentation includes a section on the marketing strategies used by the Big Tobacco companies’ and how they use different shapes, colors, flavors, and messaging to target youth. After the presentation, students often ask questions like, “if Big Tobacco companies know that nicotine is bad for you, why do they use flavors and marketing to target youth?”, “do they not care about kids?” and “do they have kids and do they let them use vapes?”. The youth are very alarmed about these products once they know more about what is in them and that they are not just “flavored water”, but actually addictive products because of the nicotine. The flavor is just a mask for these harmful*

*chemicals and it is scary that children who do not have this information get tricked into trying these products because of these fun flavors. Help us protect the youth in Vermont!*

*Sylvie Morrison, Director of Advocacy, United Way of Addison County*

*Phone: 802-388-7189*

*Celia Heath, Public Health & Advocacy Coordinator, United Way of Addison County*

I'd like to close by reading a statement from one of my high school students.

*"As a teenage girl growing up in a small town, I never thought I would find myself caught in the grip of addiction. This is the story of how I became addicted to vaping and why I now deeply regret the choices I made.*

*It all began at the start of last summer when I found myself hanging out with a group of new acquaintances, people I hadn't really talked to before. We piled into the car, and as we started driving, I noticed something peculiar. Each of them was exhaling a sweet-scented smoke that filled the air. Intrigued, I couldn't help but ask what it was they were doing.*

*In response, one of them handed me a sleek device, emitting a cloud of vapor. It looked tempting, and my curiosity got the better of me. With a momentary hesitation, I took a hit, and that's when everything changed.*

*Initially, it seemed innocent enough, just another experience to add to my teenage adventures. We continued to hang out, and that little device became a constant presence in our gatherings. It was a way for us to bond, to feel a part of something bigger. The flavors were enticing, and the dense clouds of vapor were strangely satisfying.*

*When school started, I found myself vaping almost everytime I went to the bathroom. There would usually be a little circle of girls talking while passing around a vape. I would always ask for a hit, because I really enjoyed the buzz it gave me.*

*After the first week of school was over, I was sitting at home consumed by my desire to feel that buzz again. The only thing I wanted in that moment was a vape of my own. I*

*texted an older guy, asking if he could sell me one. He agreed and I purchased my first vape, marking the onset of my deepening addiction.*

*As time went on, I started to realize that I had fallen into a dangerous trap. Vaping became more than just a social activity; it became a craving that consumed my every waking moment. Vaping gave me an unexplainable sense of comfort and ease, and I began to depend on it. Without it, I felt tired, irritable, depressed, and was unable to stop thinking about it.*

*It wasn't long before the addiction took a toll on my physical and mental health. I noticed that I had difficulty breathing, and my chest was always tight and painful. My energy levels plummeted, and I struggled to focus on my schoolwork. Even worse, I became isolated from the friends and family who truly cared about me because I couldn't be honest with them about my addiction, and I felt more alone than I ever had. Vaping had taken over my life, and I had become a slave to the habit.*

*Regret started to settle in as I saw the damage vaping had caused. I felt ashamed of my addiction, but the cravings were too powerful to resist. Now, as I look back on those days, I wish I had never taken that first hit. I regret the moments I wasted indulging in a habit that only brought me harm.*

*I didn't start vaping to be cool or fit in with others, although it seemed like a popular trend. The main reason behind my decision was the intense pleasure it provided. However, I want to emphasize this point to others: Avoid it at all costs. No matter how enticing people claim it to be, nothing justifies the addiction it brings. Even if you've already tried it, it's never too late to quit. And if you're using vaping as a means to fit in or appear cooler, don't allow the desire for acceptance to guide you toward a destructive path. Embrace your true self and surround yourself with individuals who genuinely love and accept you, without resorting to harmful habits. Regret is a powerful teacher, but it's always possible to make a change and choose a healthier, more fulfilling journey in life.”*

The student who wrote this story also happens to be my 16 year old daughter who began vaping the summer after she turned 14 and this story is used with her permission. She originally shared her story for me to use to teach our high school health classes about the dangers of vaping. When I asked her if I could use it for this testimony, her response was..and I quote “Yeah bro, try your best to ban those.

Kids can get them way too easily and if they ban flavored stuff kids wouldn't do that stuff as much." This is real and happening to so many kids in our schools in Vermont. I see it every day and it is terrifying what this will look like in the future as the health implications catch up with these kids.

If we combine robust early education for youth around the dangers of nicotine use along with removing access to these flavored products that we know are desirable and are attracting them to become users, we can have a great impact. It is also essential to provide effective, non-punitive support and treatment for those youth who do become addicted.

I can't imagine a scenario or a society where anything, including money or tax revenue, is more important than the health and well-being of our young people. Vermont is better than this and I hope that those who are on the fence or considering not banning these products will do the right thing and vote in support of S.18.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Kelly Landwehr, MSN, RN  
President, Vermont State School Nurses; Association  
School Nurse, Middlebury Union High School  
[klandwehr@vssna.org](mailto:klandwehr@vssna.org)  
(802)779-2373