

S. 241 Testimony on 4-5-16 by Ken Page, Vermont Principals' Association Executive Director

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to speak to you today about Section 2 of S. 241.

For the record, I am Ken Page, the Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association. I have worked in education my entire career, 15 years as a teacher, 21 years as a principal and now seven years looking at the statewide picture of education as the VPA Executive Director. VPA is a leadership organization with nearly 500 members who are principals, assistant principals, and athletic directors as well as retired and aspiring leaders. You know us also as the statewide organization that runs all K-12 statewide sports and activities involving hundreds of youth participants, and literally thousands of parents, community members and volunteers.

Our 15 member VPA Executive Council wanted you to hear firsthand from a practicing principal and also from me, their executive director. They have designated Erica McLaughlin an executive council member and a 2015-16 elementary principal of the year from Randolph Elementary School to speak to you. However, Erica could not be here today, so I am reading her testimony. She writes:

"As a principal I have many roles, one of which touches my heart deeply. Children often come to me and share their worries, concerns and how they are scared and feel unsafe when their parents are smoking marijuana. A fourth grader who is one of three children in the home and one of whom is cognitively impaired told me, "My mom acts silly and will go in the bedroom with her boyfriend for hours to smoke marijuana. My sister, my little brother and I can hear them laughing very loudly, but they won't answer us when we ask for something. Sometimes we get hungry, but they won't help us."

This child knew where her mom kept her marijuana and even explained how mom rolls it in paper so she can smoke it with her boyfriend or her friends. Of course this was reported to DCF and we were told it was not accepted for further investigation. It is extremely difficult to look a child in their eye and know nothing will change his feelings of insecurity, because it does not rise to the level for an outside agency to intervene.

With marijuana being illegal now, I have experiences with children already saying they do not get the support they ask for and need. I am extremely fearful with adults having easier access to a drug that is proven to impair judgment and reduce reactions that more of our children will feel scared, worried and uncared for in their home. Our mental health agencies and other support agencies like DCF do not have the resources NOW to care for the extreme circumstances that are currently present in the lives of our youth. I do not see how it could be close to possible for local mental health agencies and DCF to support our children by legalizing marijuana. Our children are our future and they deserve to not only FEEL safe, but BE safe in their home and when adults in their life are not making safe choices, then their community should rally behind them to help keep them safe. Our "system" is tragically broken and we struggle to support the children in the system now. Legalizing marijuana is only going to tax the "system" even more!"

On January 28th, our VPA executive council concurred with the statement by the Vermont Superintendents' Association that student safety must come first. We asked you to consider these four questions before moving ahead to consider legislation:

1. Can you assure us that child protection and child welfare issues are at the forefront of your actions?
2. Can you tell us that the enactment will have an indisputably positive effect on reducing access to marijuana by individuals under the age 21?
3. Can you tell us with certainty that state agencies are provided the enhanced capacity necessary to successfully implement a legalization and regulation program, if, and when one is established?
4. Lastly, can you assure us that the Agencies of Human Services and Education are provided with sufficient resources to better respond to challenges associated with marijuana use by students and family members of students?

You can certainly hear in the real examples given by Erica McLaughlin that she too is worried about these safety questions. And I must confess to being perplexed about why we would move an adult issue like marijuana use for recreational use, to the “front of the line” without assuring ourselves and the public that we will address school safety issues first.

We, like the rest of Vermont, are torn about the best ways to proceed. But, what we are sure of is this: our kids are our most precious commodity and no Vermonter would willingly want to do anything to make our kids less safe. So, our advice is to slow down, take your time, consider all of the implications and if you decide to pass it, get it right, right from the start.

I imagine that you may be interested in what schools are currently doing as it relates to health education. Many schools use the Botvin LifeSkills training program, which begins in grades 3&4 and continues through grade 10. This evidence-based prevention program consists of 8-10 units per year on topics such as self image and self improvement, and includes separate units on the myths and realities of smoking, alcohol and marijuana; there are also units on advertising, violence and the media, coping with anxiety, and anger, assertiveness and resolving conflicts. They are usually delivered by a certified health educator or guidance counselor. When schools had Title 4 Drug and Safe Free schools money, it would fund a student assistance counselor and the LifeSkills curriculum materials. Sadly, most of these federal funds have now dried up.

Finally, as I think about the proposed legislation, I am left with lingering questions and concerns, both large and small. Let me make just four more points about student safety:

1. I realize that the prevention funds are administered through the Department of Health; but I can't help but wonder if schools can expect any support from the beleaguered Agency of Education, who currently doesn't even have sufficient staff to administer current programs let alone to support the field around new safety concern that will come if the legislation is enacted now;
2. We all acknowledge that education of young people is paramount if we are to combat drug abuse, yet I think it is a bit ironic that not a single school or AOE personnel are named to the Marijuana Program Review Committee within S. 241;

- 3. The newly adopted National Professional Standards for Educational Leaders includes a standard called “Community of Care and Support for Students.” which says that “effective leaders build and maintain a safe, caring and healthy school environment that meets the academic, social, emotional and physical needs of each student.” Without safety concerns being addressed up front, I simply can’t see how some school leaders, particularly those without adequate supports already in place, will ever, ever say that their schools are safe; and**
- 4. Lastly, this concern was shared with me by a school board member who has been supporting schools by his dedicated service for many years. The more I thought about what he said, the more concerned I grew, which prompts me now to urge you to slow down the legalization initiative in favor of a more thoughtful approach: He said that he believed that over 40 million people are within a days drive from Vermont. Unlike Colorado and Washington, the difference as it relates to Vermont is access. He voiced grave concerns about this many people having ready access to Vermont’s marijuana and wondered if you had considered the many, many serious implications this easy access would have on the nature and safety of our small state?**

Clearly we must be able to determine that we can adequately address child safety and welfare issues before moving ahead with this legislation. It’s the very least we can do for our children to assure their future successes.

Thanks for the opportunity to testify before you today.