

Discipline Is Not the Answer

Better Approaches to On-campus Student Tobacco Use

BACKGROUND

Youth tobacco use, driven by e-cigarettes and vaping nicotine, remains high in the United States. In 2020, 23.6% of high school students and 6.7% of middle school students reported using any type of tobacco product in the **last 30 days according to** the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Recently, CDC and FDA released 2021 data for e-cigarettes only that show youth vaping remains a serious **problem**. Sales of e-cigarettes are at an **all-time high** as of June 2021. A recent Truth Initiative survey shows that a majority of young people anticipated seeing people vape at similar or higher rates as before the pandemic when they returned to in-person **school**.

Schools play a central role confronting and addressing youth tobacco use. As students have returned to in-person learning, educators are concerned that youth vaping and other tobacco use will increase again due to social pressure and access. A Truth Initiative study of teachers indicates they are “extremely concerned” about students’ tobacco use, particularly vaping, saying it results in frequent class interruptions and decreased **student focus**.

To address these concerns, Truth Initiative developed *Vaping: Know the truth*, a national youth vaping prevention curriculum for high school and middle school students that gives young people the facts about e-cigarette use and provides resources to quit. This online program was developed to be a positive, modern approach to guide teachers and educate youth about these products and their risks. It is intended to be used in the classroom for all students. It is not intended as a remedial program or a punishment for those caught vaping or using other tobacco products on school grounds.

As schools develop or revamp and modernize their smoke- or tobacco-free policies, we get many questions about what schools should do when students violate these policies and use tobacco products on campus. We provide some suggestions below for how best to address student tobacco use in school.

APPROACHES FOR DEALING WITH VIOLATIONS OF SCHOOL SMOKE- OR TOBACCO-FREE POLICIES

99% of smokers initiate tobacco use **before their 26th birthday**. This doesn’t happen by accident. It’s because the tobacco industry has a long history of youth-appealing marketing that continues today, selling slick new products such as **e-cigarettes**. Because nicotine is addictive and can impact the developing brain, and because a well-funded industry pushes their products into young people’s hands, it is important that schools take a supportive approach to discipline for tobacco violations and avoid taking a punitive approach to disciplining students who violate the school tobacco-related policies. To that end, **Truth Initiative does not support suspension or expulsions from school as a punishment for tobacco use, including vaping, on school grounds.**

We know that suspension can cause even more **problems** at school, leading to lower test scores and graduation rates, among other poor **outcomes**. As an organization committed to equity and inclusion, we note with concern that there are serious differences in how suspension and expulsions are used, with Black, Latino, and students of other minorities being much more likely to be suspended or expelled. Most importantly, **we believe that the best way to help young people not use tobacco on school grounds is to help them stop using tobacco.** Punitive measures will not help students quit.

Truth Initiative recommends that students who violate tobacco policies be approached in a supportive way that focuses on encouraging them to quit using tobacco products. There are “alternative-to-suspension” programs developed for cases where students have repeatedly violated the policy. While we do not endorse any specific programs, we provide a list of programs below that schools may wish to explore. Furthermore, we reiterate that *Vaping: know the truth* is **not** an alternative-to-suspension program and is intended for all students (not just those who get caught using tobacco) to be a positive way to help young people make healthy decisions around tobacco use.

What about Violations of Tobacco Policies at the College Level?

While expulsion or suspension as a disciplinary tactic at the college level is less studied, we do not encourage this approach at the college level. There are other options, such as a social normative approach, that focuses on changing the social norms at the college, educating the campus about the policy and providing a supportive environment to direct tobacco users to cessation services. Other campuses employ a more formal approach with the use of fines, service hours or required meetings with the Dean to carry out enforcement of their tobacco policies, and some colleges use both approaches. One study found that having both a social normative approach and formal enforcement was most successful in encouraging compliance with the policy. As at the high school level, we discourage police involvement at the college level.

Finally, we encourage schools to refer students who indicate they want to quit using tobacco to services that can help them succeed. **This is Quitting**, Truth Initiative’s quit smoking program, is targeted specifically to young people and tailored based on age and product usage to give students appropriate recommendations and support for quitting. Your state or local health departments may also provide assistance for young people wanting to quit. Below we provide additional suggestions for students to find help to quit tobacco use.

Schools have a hefty responsibility for the youth of our nation — they must not only provide education and skills to prepare them for adult life but also play a role in helping young people make safe and healthy choices to set them up for success. Truth Initiative is pleased to offer our *Vaping: Know the truth curriculum* and *This is Quitting* to help schools in that endeavor. We hope that schools will review the list of resources below to develop supportive and appropriate disciplinary measures for students who use tobacco products on school grounds.

POTENTIAL RESOURCES FOR EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS REGARDING TOBACCO POLICY VIOLATIONS

Truth Initiative does not endorse the following programs and includes them for school systems looking into suspension alternatives to evaluate based on their campuses’ contexts and needs.

School Policy Resources, alternative-to-suspension, and cessation services that may be useful for Schools

- American Heart Association’s [Tobacco-Free Schools Toolkit](#)
- [The American College of Preventive Medicine Tobacco Cessation Resources for Youth](#) – Tools and resources for parents, teachers and counselors on tobacco and nicotine cessation