

Sonoma County Youth Vaping Assessment

February 2021
Summary



The Youth Vaping Assessment was conducted by the County of Sonoma Department of Health Services, Impact Sonoma Tobacco-Nicotine Prevention Program (hereafter Impact Sonoma) during the 2018-19 school year.¹ The purpose of the Assessment was to provide a current profile and in-depth understanding of the vaping issue among local youth. Since vaping was known to be an issue that was overwhelming schools across the nation, a particular focus of the Assessment was the impact to schools, their response, and need for support. As is discussed in the Summary, the information gathered in the Assessment has been critical to implementing effective and relevant policy and systems-level changes.

The results of the local Assessment concur with state and national studies that show vaping (of nicotine) among youth is a serious problem, one that has grown precipitously since 2015. Recent (2019) results from the highly regarded national survey, Monitoring the Future, shows that 1 in 4 high school seniors report vaping nicotine in the past month, with about 12% vaping daily.² In Sonoma County, 26.5% of 11th graders, and nearly 50 percent of those attending alternative high schools have used an e-cigarette recently.³

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This Assessment was intended to look beyond prevalence data to understand why, where and how much by examining the experiences of our local schools, youth, and parents. We sought to learn more about the scope and depth of the problem, including: school use of discipline and restorative approaches, and the offering of cessation tools and referrals for related help, and to determine what support was needed by schools, youth and parents.

The findings have resulted in many insights and useful information. Breaking down the issue by school type and grade and hearing from a variety of perspectives has brought new clarity to a complex problem. The local Assessment points to many ways in which this worrisome trend can be reversed; it has guided the activities and interventions of Impact Sonoma, schools, and our community partners.

¹ Impact Sonoma received funding from the California Department of Justice (DOJ) Tobacco Grant program from Proposition 56 tobacco tax dollars to conduct the Assessment.

² National Institute on Drug Abuse, Monitoring the Future, 2019, www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/trends-statistics/monitoring-future

³ 2017-2018 California Healthy Kids Survey Data, at least 1 day in the last 30 days.

The Assessment

The full Assessment consisted of:

- 10 Listening Sessions, conducted with school age youth and school administrators/staff.
- 50 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), conducted with school district administrators and staff, and school age youth.
- 100 Youth Vaping Surveys, administered electronically to Sonoma County K-12 public and private school administrators.
- 425 Brief Surveys of community members at various points in time, both in-person and electronically.

The largest component of the assessment was the Youth Vaping Survey. The effort yielded an exceptional response rate (Chart 1), with essentially all comprehensive high school administrators returning surveys, and 81% of middle schools. This response rate adds to our confidence that the findings are a true representation of Sonoma County.

What Was Learned

Vaping nicotine at school is a problem throughout Sonoma County, in both public and private schools. When asked how frequently vaping of nicotine is a problem on campus, 63% of comprehensive high schools reported it was a “frequent” or “very frequent” problem. When comparing the problem to the previous year, about 70% of high schools and 50% of middle schools reported that vaping had gotten worse. Our survey found that most middle schools, and all comprehensive and alternative high schools, saw evidence of student vaping on campus during the 2018-2019 school year. Not surprisingly, the majority of vaping is happening with middle and high school aged youth; few elementary and K-8 schools reported seeing evidence of vaping on campus. Reflecting this trend, vaping of nicotine was reported as a major discipline issue on Sonoma County school campuses. Nearly half (47%) of

Extent of Problem on School Campuses

Finding:
63%

of comprehensive high school administrators reported that they were dealing with the problem of vaping on a frequent or very frequent basis.

“Vaping is considered an epidemic in our secondary campuses.”

~ Sonoma County District Administrator

Chart 1.
**Youth Vaping Survey:
Sonoma County Response Rate-By School Type
and % of Student Population**

School Type	Response Rate	Student Population Represented*
Elementary Schools	52%	56%
TK/K-Eight Grade Schools	61%	60%
Middle Schools	81%	77%
Comprehensive High Schools	95%	100%
Alternative High Schools	39%	82%

*Student population data is based on K-12 public school enrollment.

comprehensive high schools reported vaping as their number one discipline issue, with another sixteen (16) percent ranking it as number two.

The most noted places on or near campus where youth were found to be vaping included bathrooms, parking lots/sidewalks, and to/from school. Among key informants, the topic of the bathrooms having to be closed and/or more closely supervised due to vaping was a major theme, and a burden on both students and

Chart 2.
Vape Devices Confiscated (2018-19)

School Type	Per Month (Estimated)	Annual (Estimated)
Middle Schools	191	1,910
Comprehensive High Schools	454	4,540
Alternative High Schools	110	1,100
Monthly/Annual Total	755	7,550

school staff. Chart 2 is yet another measure demonstrating the severity of the problem in Sonoma County. It shows that, in any given month, the estimated number of vape devices confiscated is **755**, bringing an annual estimate to **7,550** devices (calculated for a 10-month school year).

For context, comprehensive high schools graduated about the same number of seniors (4,500) as the number of vape devices they collected. It is also notable that these are only the devices that are found and confiscated by school staff, and therefore represent only a fraction of the vaping devices being used on campus. Our research also found that “many” teachers were not aware of when students are vaping, as reported by high school administrators. Middle school administrators most commonly report that “some” of their teachers are able to tell if a student is vaping. (Options included: All, most, some, few, or no teachers able to tell when a student is vaping.) According to interviews with youth, the devices’ look (easily confused with common school supplies like a flash drive or highlighter pen) and size (small and easy to hide) contribute to school staff missing use in class and on campus. In addition, youth shared that it is easy to restrict the vapor from being visible, making it even harder for a teacher to detect, and that vaping goes on in the classroom as a result, noting that while teachers may not be aware of it, youth are keen to this activity.

Extent of Problem on School Campuses

An estimated **7,550 devices** were collected in the 2018-19 school year on school campuses throughout Sonoma County.

Focusing in on high school, where most of the vaping is occurring, comprehensive high schools collected about the same number of vape devices as seniors who graduated from those schools in 2018-19 = 4,500.

Students report obtaining vaping devices from a variety of sources. School administrators find social sources are the most common. Social sources include sharing or purchasing from another underage student or obtaining from an older friend/sibling. Among high school students, online purchasing was also among the most common responses, particularly

by alternative high schools. Schools reported that “distribution” (illegal sales/dealing) was a problem on campus, with 16% of comprehensive high schools noting this as a “frequent” or “very frequent” problem. The data were corroborated by key informants, who reported issues with students selling e-cigarettes/vaping devices on campus. Principals report the use of the SnapChat phone app as a way that students communicate with people who are illegally selling. These transactions become particularly worrisome when they are between the child and an unknown adult, and when they occur off campus, as reported by one school principal. In these situations, it is impossible to know for sure what substance(s) are present in the devices, which was stated as a serious concern.

When schools respond to incidents of vaping on campus, administrators always meet with the student and notify the parent. Usually, a meeting with a parent/guardian ensues. Suspension was among the most common discipline interventions used by middle and high schools. In key informant interviews, administrators reported suspensions from one to four days for possession of drug paraphernalia, which is how an e-cigarette is classified. Interviewees indicated that cannabis related vape devices carried a more serious punishment. The Assessment also noted that many school districts were interested in and already moving in the direction of using restorative interventions rather than exclusionary punishments (suspension). Sixty percent of middle schools and 27% of comprehensive high schools reported using a restorative conference for a first-time offence. A restorative conference typically provides students with a diversion from suspension option by completing activities in lieu of exclusionary discipline (suspension). Activities can include: increased education, writing a paper, presentation to peers, speaking with a mental health counselor, etc.

To support students looking to quit, some schools are offering cessation resources. Cessation support is offered at the majority of high schools, while just over half of middle schools are offering support. Middle school administrators reported that middle schools were not aware of cessation resources for their students. Schools report further needs for support to provide education to parents, teachers and students on the topic of nicotine use, and specifically vaping.

Summary and Successes

Impact Sonoma researched the current landscape of youth nicotine vaping in Sonoma County and found that many Sonoma County middle and high schools are inundated with the job of managing all aspects of youth vaping. Findings further indicate that many schools have addressed this issue with exclusionary discipline practices such as student suspensions, and on a collective level, closing areas of the campus, namely bathrooms, while also limiting other privileges. Schools have addressed a desire to move into more restorative practices, and many have begun to transition as they have found supportive resources to bridge this gap. Further, schools need more resources and information for teachers, parents, and students to educate them on the issue of youth nicotine use in the form of vaping. Each component of the Assessment had an additional benefit of relationship development between Impact Sonoma and educational partners. With the identification of the issues, and schools reaching out more, Impact Sonoma has been able to fulfill requests for materials, planning and TA support, and data. School districts have applied for and received funding to address youth nicotine use on their campuses. The information in the Assessment has also informed policymakers and contributed to a fuller understanding of the issue, resulting in renewed interest and the recent passage of policy to regulate the retail environment and restrict the sale of e-cigarettes and flavored tobacco products. Finally, Assessment findings have been used by school districts who have submitted successful applications for grant funding to address youth nicotine use on their campuses.

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