

# The Intelligencer

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## Spike in vaping by teens triggers community education, FDA action

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A recent Pennsylvania Youth Survey shows 19.5 percent of Bucks County youth have vaped. Schools are revisiting policies and initiating community education forums to warn youth and parents of the addictive nature and other dangers. Recent FDA action intends to restrict retail sales of flavored juices, commonly used among youth who vápe.

When the 17-year-old started vaping more than a year ago, he did it for the buzz, the novelty, the flavors and because friends were doing it, too.

Now, the Central Bucks senior does it because he's addicted, a consequence he didn't anticipate when he, like many others his age, turned to it for fun.

When the teen, who requested anonymity, heard that a recent Pennsylvania Youth Survey showed 37 percent of his peers vaped at some point in the last 30 days, he questioned the number.

"It should be higher," said the teen, who added he sees more than half of his classmates vaping in the bathrooms, school hallways and around town.

Vaping, or Juuling, among youth in Bucks County is higher than both the state and national averages, recently released reports show. A 2017 Pennsylvania Youth Survey showed that 19.5 percent of students in Bucks County schools vaped in the last 30 days. Among 12th graders, 37.2 percent reported they used some kind of vaping device in the same time frame, more than double the 2017 national average of 17 percent.

Even some elementary school students own up to trying it: Of the 1.7 percent of Bucks County sixth-graders who said they vaped, nearly 70 percent reported they did not know what substance they were inhaling.

Students found vaping in schools in at least three Bucks County districts have required emergency medical attention because of “adverse reactions” to substances they inhaled.

Nationwide, children are using e-cigarettes at epidemic levels, according a recent Food and Drug Administration statement. The number of U.S. high school students who reported using e-cigarettes rose 78 percent between 2017 and 2018 to more than 3 million — 1.5 million more students than the previous year, according to data released by the FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Recently, FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb announced the agency would start restricting sales of most types of flavored e-cigarettes to specialized vaping stores and online retailers who can verify a buyer’s age.

The November announcement followed a September statement in which Gottlieb threatened to halt sales of flavored electronic cigarettes if manufacturers couldn’t prove they were doing enough to keep them out of the hands of children and teens.

“We won’t let this pool of kids, a pool of future potential smokers, of future disease and death, to continue to build,” Gottlieb said last month.

Statewide, 16 percent of students, from 379 out of 500 districts surveyed, admitted to vaping. In Montgomery County, 16 percent of all students surveyed reporting vaping at least once in the previous 30 days.

“Vaping is of immense concern as we are well above our national peers in the use of vaping, especially among eighth and 10th graders,” said Geoffrey Kolchin, administrator of the Pennsylvania Youth Survey, or PAYS. The state report showed that 29 percent of 12th graders and nearly 11 percent of eighth graders vaped, both figures nearly double the national average.

He said the PAYS is the best local indicator of at-risk behavior among students surveyed, in grades, 6, 8, 10 and 12.

While county and state figures are widely posted, the release of districtwide data is left up to superintendents, Kolchin said. Central Bucks, Quakertown Community and Council Rock are among just a handful of the 13 districts that released their PAYS results to the public.

“If we have young men and women feeling the need to vape frequently during the day, that is a problem. As a community, we need to talk about it,” said Abram Lucabaugh, assistant superintendent of secondary education for the Central Bucks School District.

### **Easy to find**

Vaping devices, which include e-cigarettes and vape pens, hit the commercial market in 2007, initially marketed as a “smoking cessation” tool. They typically have to be plugged in or powered by battery so a heating component can warm an e-liquid cartridge that then releases the aerosol to be inhaled in the lungs.

Though the devices are sold to those 18 and older, some students admit to purchasing vaping products online, educators say.

The ease of their accessibility is worrisome to Council Rock School District officials, who say they are seeing a growing number of middle school students vaping who, when caught, rarely perceive their actions as harmful. According to Council Rock’s district PAYS survey, 14 percent of eighth-graders used a vaping device in the previous 30 days. For 12th-graders, that number jumped to 40 percent.

“What’s troubling is that kids will then pass it to other students and when someone else uses it, they don’t know what they’re smoking or what’s in the device,” said Chuck Lambert, director of Special Services for Council Rock. “We are looking at how we can better educate students about the dangers; we want to be more proactive than reactive.”

The most popular device among youth, according to many Bucks County educators, is the Juul. Juuling, a type of electronic cigarette that looks like a USB stick, is a challenge for parents and educators to detect. With its small size and odorless nature, teachers have a hard time catching students.

The Central Bucks teen interviewed for this story said he doesn't use a Juul because the refillable pods are "too expensive," but he buys generic pods that he can fill with his own nicotine juices. He spends between \$20 and \$30 on vaping juices a month. Since he's too young to legally smoke, he said he buys it from friends who are over 18. At school, he vapes in the bathroom.

"It's easy to make it so you don't create a lot of smoke," the teen said. "You go into a stall and use it and exhale a little vapor and walk out."

Jennifer Polinchock, assistant superintendent of Centennial School District, knows vaping is happening in bathrooms there.

"It's a matter of catching it; kids are clever and even have lookouts," she said. "But it's hard to gauge the problem based on how often they are caught."

Sometimes, they end up in the nurse's office, she said, adding that a few students have required medical attention after experiencing a rapid pulse, extreme nausea, dizziness and extreme lethargy.

Quakertown Community High School nurse Margie Regan said many of the students who come to her say the devices and juices can be picked up at gas stations and local stores. Though most of the vaping devices discovered at the school contain nicotine juices, some have been found with THC, the chemical in marijuana; it then becomes a drug violation and the school's police resource officer gets involved, she said. "It's easier to get than cigarettes, and it's a danger," she said. "Some are inhaling substances, and they don't even know what it is; it's going right into their lungs."

### **Penalties and education**

Bucks County school administrators are aware of the soaring numbers of youth vaping in the region and they are reviewing policies, weaving warnings into curriculum and, in some cases, considering taking a tougher stance if a student is caught. Most schools fine students as a penalty and impose detention. In Neshaminy and Central Bucks school districts, for instance, students are fined \$50 and required to take a smoking cessation class.

But penalties alone won't deter youth, they say. Districts including Pennridge, Quakertown, Neshaminy and Council Rock, have held public information forums to educate parents and communities. But district officials say they are facing an uphill battle with social and economic forces they can't control. They know it's not just peer pressure attracting kids to the devices.

One of the biggest challenges is that many of the devices and nicotine-flavors are marketed to youth. Teens have been drawn to the fruit and candy flavors and the sleek devices to deliver the nicotine.

David Fialko, a certified prevention specialist with The Council of Southeast Pennsylvania, said popular vaping devices, like the Juul, and the flavored products are appealing to kids. Juul Labs Inc., for example, offers pods for its USB-shaped devices in "fruit medley" and "crème brûlée" flavors.

"The way they are packaged and the fact they are disguised to look like flash drives and tops of highlighters ... This is not marketed for adults. They are marketed to clearly mask what they really are," Fialko said.

Labels or signs that maintain some flavorings are FDA approved can be misleading. "Many of the flavorings are blends that may be FDA approved for food flavor, but they were never meant to be combusted and inhaled," he said.

Fialko said one Juul pod has the nicotine content of at least one pack of cigarettes, and some teens report going through one or two pods a day. Only a fraction of teens know each pod contains such high levels of the addictive stimulant, but they are feeling it in class, and some teens feel they need to take multiple bathroom trips to vape and get through the day, he said.

Fialko travels to schools across the region, alerting students, parents and educators about the risks of vaping. With some products, he said, teens are inhaling "microfine metal particles — tin and lead — when the coil heats up." A 2018 New York University Medicine study found evidence linking e-cigarette smoking and increased risk of heart disease and cancer. Though the long-term effects of vaping are still not widely known, Fialko said the addictive nature of the trend should be a red flag.

A key to driving down the numbers is prevention and education, officials said.

“We are trying to get the word out that it’s not healthy, and we are doing it through our curriculum, student assistant teams and smoking cessation programs,” said Paul Mahoney, supervisor of pupil services for Neshaminy School District, who recently invited Fialko to address the dangers of vaping at a middle school forum. “The challenge is getting students’ attention and getting information out on the health concerns.”

Polinchock, of Centennial School District, said it’s often too late to start educating kids about dangers of drugs in high school. “It needs to happen in the younger grades,” she said. Aside from the obvious physical dangers, the root of the experimentation with drugs is just as worrisome, she said. “It’s a concern as to why they need to feel the euphoria and why they are doing it in school,” she said.

Central Bucks’ Lucabaugh echoed that concern and said the district is planning a town hall meeting to have a community-wide discussion about the dangers, the rise of devices and their addictive nature.

Donna Holmes, spokeswoman for Palisades School District, said her district has launched a “life skills” course of study in the curriculum to help teach students how to build refusal skills and manage stress in all grades. Building such skills, she said, may prevent students from vaping or other risky behaviors.

The mother of the Central Bucks student interviewed said she tried to forbid her son’s vaping habit, confiscating devices from him and disposing them.

“But that wouldn’t be enough to make him stop; he would find ways to buy more,” she said. “It’s becoming normalized, like smoking was for our generation. Of course I want him to quit, and we’ll be here to help him when he’s ready to quit.”

Her son said that he no longer feels a rush when he vapes nicotine juices. Though he feels it’s safer than cigarettes, he wants to stop.

“I barely feel it at this point,” he said. “I do it now because I’m addicted. It’s definitely not something I want for my entire life.”