

Opinion: Michigan lags in tobacco education, and it's killing residents



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Published March 5, 2024

A clear problem. A clear solution. And resounding support for action. Ask any lawmaker, past or present, and they will tell you that the stars of policy making almost never align in such a perfect fashion. Needless to say, when they do, it is an opportunity that should never go to waste. That is exactly the position Michigan's legislature finds itself in now following the introduction of a comprehensive bill package aimed at curbing tobacco use among kids — a problem that has plagued our state for far too long now.

And there's no debating that point. Tobacco use among Michigan children is a serious problem. One only needs to take a cursory glance at the facts, figures, and statistics on the matter for that to be made abundantly clear. The numbers aren't just bad. They're downright upsetting. That's why we lead the Keep MI Kids Tobacco Free Alliance, a group of more than 120 public health and community groups working to protect youth from the dangers of tobacco. Our Alliance is committed to enacting common-sense policy to prioritize the health of our residents, specifically our youth.

Michigan youth e-cigarette use is almost 50 percent higher than the national average, which comes as no surprise considering our state's failure to adequately fund tobacco deterrence and control programs coupled with a notoriously lax marketplace when it comes to selling tobacco products to minors. Michigan ranks 49th in the country in tobacco prevention and cessation funding, and in the past 10 years, no state has issued more No-Tobacco-Sale Order for repeated sales to underage children.

And it certainly does not help matters that our children are being directly targeted by Big Tobacco. Every year the tobacco industry spends more than \$320 million in Michigan marketing its products and working to attract and retain new customers. And with an array of youth-oriented e-cigarette flavors like cotton candy and bubble gum available, it is no wonder that 8 out of 10 kids who use tobacco start with a flavored e-cigarette, which — conveniently for tobacco companies — sometimes contain as much nicotine as a standard pack of 20 cigarettes.

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All the while, tobacco use remains the number one preventable cause of death in Michigan and the United States, killing more than 16,000 Michiganders each year and costing our state in excess of \$5 billion annually in smoking-related health care costs.

A comprehensive legislative package was just introduced, offering a host of strong, proven tobacco prevention policies that significantly reduce tobacco use among Michigan's youth. The package includes:

- Ending the sale of all flavored tobacco products, including flavored e-cigarettes, menthol-flavored cigarettes, and flavored hookah tobacco. (Senate Bills 649 and 650)
- Requiring tobacco retailers to be licensed, just like liquor retailers, so the state can enforce laws prohibiting the sale of tobacco to minors. (SBs 651 and 652)
- Taxing e-cigarettes and vaping products containing nicotine for the first time and increasing tobacco taxes with proceeds used to reduce tobacco use among youth. (SB 648)
- Allowing local counties and cities to create tougher restrictions on tobacco sales within their own community. (SB 647)
- Repealing ineffective penalties that punish kids for tobacco purchase use and possession. (SB 653 and 654)

These policies would go a long way toward creating Michigan's first tobacco-free generation, and we are grateful to Senator Sam Singh and his colleagues for stepping up to take on such an important issue. The time for action is long overdue. Michigan has no tax on e-cigarettes or vaping products, and it has been 20 years since our state increased taxes on cigarettes. Michigan is also one of only 10 states that does not currently require retailers to obtain a license to sell tobacco, making effective enforcement almost impossible. Other states and hundreds of local government units around the country have already acted to end the sale of flavored tobacco products in an effort to reverse the crisis that is youth e-cigarette use. The point is these measures are the kind thoughtful, thorough, proven policies that Michigan desperately needs.

And Michiganders resoundingly agree with these policy changes. Across party lines, age cohorts and demographic groups, Michigan voters overwhelmingly support the measures outlined above with over two-thirds of Michigan voters offering their strong support for the bill package according to recent polling released by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and the Michigan chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Seemingly everyone wants a better, healthier, tobacco-free future for our children. Now is the time to show that Michiganders choose protecting kids over Big Tobacco. The lives of our youth literally depend on it.