



Schools Supporting Students to Quit Tobacco Use as an Alternative to Suspension: Lessons from the Field

Background

In 2022, more than **3 million U.S. middle and high school students** reported having used a commercial* tobacco product in the past 30 days.¹ Electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes), sometimes called vapes, continue to be the most used tobacco product among these students. Because e-cigarettes can deliver high levels of nicotine and come in flavors that appeal to young people, vaping puts them at risk for nicotine addiction.² Nicotine exposure during adolescence can harm the parts of the brain that control attention, learning, mood, and impulse control.²

Evidence shows that tobacco industry advertising and promotion influences young people to start using tobacco.³ Tobacco companies have used marketing tactics to target young people and specifically members of certain population groups, including Black, American Indian and Alaska Native, LGBTQ+, and youth with lower socioeconomic status. Young people are exposed to tobacco advertising online and in retail stores, and the addictive tobacco products are marketed in kid-friendly flavors such as “Rainbow Candy” and “Fizzy Peach.” Most young people who vape use flavored e-cigarettes, particularly fruity and sweet flavors. A 2019 study across 30 U.S. cities found that, on average, 63% of public schools were located within 1,000 feet of a tobacco retailer.⁴



Creating Positive, Safe, and Supportive Environments in Schools

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education released [Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline](#). This resource for schools helps to create positive, safe, and supportive environments that can prevent and change inappropriate behaviors. This guidance also recommends using suspension only as a last resort for serious violations.⁵ In fact, school suspension can have long-term impacts. Students who are suspended miss time in the classroom and are at risk for not graduating on time, repeat a grade, drop out, or become involved with the criminal justice system.⁶ Suspensions also affect a greater proportion of students of color, students receiving special education services, students from low-income families, LGBTQ+ students, and male students.⁷

Most young people who vape want to quit.⁸ Suspending students who violate a school's tobacco-free policy is unlikely to help them quit tobacco use, and could alter their academic and future goals.⁵ Because young people have been unfairly targeted with marketing tactics, the science of addiction, and long-term consequences of suspension, schools should provide a supportive environment and encouragement to quit using tobacco products, **not** suspension.⁶

* “Commercial tobacco” means harmful products that are made and sold by tobacco companies. It does not include “traditional tobacco” used by indigenous groups for religious or ceremonial purposes.

RESOURCES

[Electronic Cigarettes](#)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention resource about the risk and health effects of using e-cigarettes.

[Discipline Is Not the Answer: Better Approaches to On-Campus Student Tobacco Use](#)

Truth Initiative® resource for helping administrators handle violations of tobacco-free school policy by supporting students to help them quit tobacco use.

[Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline](#)

U.S. Department of Education resource for creating disciplinary policies and practices that prepare students for life.

[Student Commercial Tobacco Use in Schools: Alternative Measures](#)

Public Health Law Center resource for handling student tobacco use and nicotine addiction without expulsion or disciplinary measures.

[Quit Vaping](#)

Teen.smokefree.gov resource for helping students quit e-cigarettes.

[Tobacco-Free District Model Policy](#)

Alliance for Healthier Generation's guide for creating a healthy environment for students with model policy, administrative rules, and student code of conduct language.

[Public Health Law Center](#)

Guide for implementing and enforcing a K-12 tobacco-free campus.

[This is Quitting Program](#)

Truth Initiative® free mobile program designed to help students quit e-cigarettes.



States in Action

School districts across the country are implementing tobacco prevention programs as an alternative to out-of-school suspension for students who violate a school's tobacco-free policy. Below are two examples of alternative-to-suspension programs in action.



FLORIDA

The [Bureau of Tobacco Free Florida](#) works with the School District of Palm Beach County's Tobacco Prevention Program to develop, administer, and promote an online three-hour [tobacco prevention course](#) on the dangers of tobacco product use. The program is an alternative to out-of-school suspension for students who violate tobacco-free campus policies. The course is offered in schools across the state. To take the course, a designated school-based staff member provides an enrollment link to students who then independently enroll on the course website.

Since August 2020, **15,431 students** from **687 schools** have enrolled in the course, with a **69% completion rate**.

An example of a school district implementing the course as an alternative to suspension is Duval County Public Schools, located in Jacksonville, Florida. The school district educates more than 129,000 students and includes the tobacco education course in their district's middle and high school Code of Student Conduct handbook. Students who violate the district's tobacco-free campus policy are required to take the course at no cost.



NEW JERSEY

The [New Jersey Tobacco Control Program](#), with [New Jersey Prevention Network](#) and [Tobacco-Free for a Healthy New Jersey](#), offers the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center's [ASPIRE tobacco prevention program](#). The online program offers courses that explain the dangers of tobacco use and nicotine addiction and provides strategies for quitting tobacco use. The course is designed for middle and high school students, at no cost. After taking the course, 95% of the students learned new facts about tobacco and have a greater understanding of how tobacco use affects their health.⁹

Schools are encouraged to offer the course as an alternative to out-of-school suspension for students who are caught with addictive tobacco products on school grounds. The New Jersey Tobacco Control Program establishes ASPIRE accounts and provides technical support. School personnel enroll students who take the course at their own pace.

Since 2019, **120 New Jersey schools** have used ASPIRE, and more than **930 students** have completed the course.



References

1. Park-Lee E, Ren C, Cooper M, Cornelius M, Jamal A, Cullen KA. Tobacco Product Use Among Middle and High School Students – United States, 2022. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 2022; 71:45.
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. E-Cigarette Use Among Youth and Young Adults. A Report of the Surgeon General. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health, 2016.
3. Perks SN, Armour B, Agaku IT. Cigarette Brand Preference and Pro-Tobacco Advertising Among Middle and High School Students—United States, 2012–2016. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 2018;67(4):119–24 [accessed 2023 Feb 24].
4. Aspire Center Organization. Advancing Science & Practice in the Retail Environment. Executive Summary: Retail Tobacco Density & Access
5. U.S. Department of Education, Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline, Washington, D.C., 2014.
6. Public Health Law Center. Student Commercial Tobacco Use in Schools - Alternative Measures | Public Health Law Center. Accessed April 3, 2023.
7. Leung-Gagné M, McCombs J, Scott C, Losen DJ. (2022). Pushed out: Trends and disparities in out-of-school suspension. *Learning Policy Institute*. <https://doi.org/10.54300/235.277>. Accessed April 3, 2023.
8. Gentzke AS, Wang TW, Cornelius M, Park-Lee E, Ren C, Sawdey MD, Cullen KA, Loretan C, Jamal A, Homa DM. Tobacco Product Use and Associated Factors Among Middle and High School Students – National Youth Tobacco Survey, United States, 2021. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 2022; 71(No. SS-5):1–29.
9. The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. A Smoking Prevention Interactive Experience (ASPIRE). Accessed April 28, 2023.