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EDITOR'S PICK

Local schools dealing with e-cigarettes

Karen Mansfield 1 hr ago

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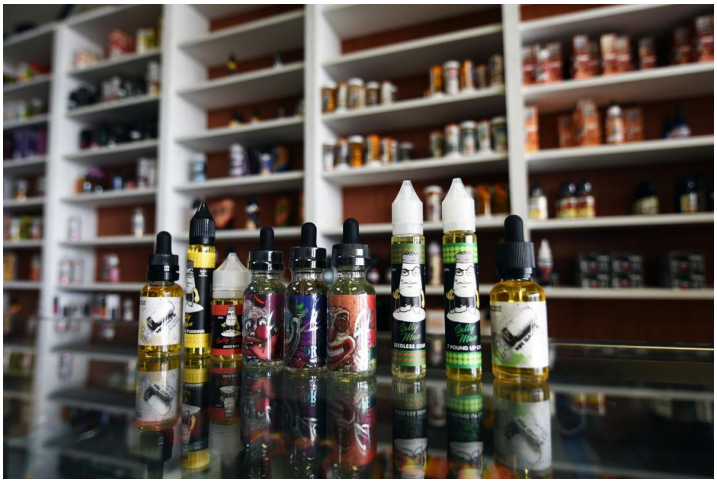
Juul is a popular device among high school students because it resembles a USB drive.
Holly Tonini

In recent years, Bentworth School District Superintendent Scott Martin has witnessed an increase in the use of e-cigarettes and vape pens among high school students.

Vaping, it seems, is everywhere, and school districts in Washington and Greene counties are educating teachers, parents and students about the dangers of using e-cigarettes and vape pens.

School districts also are updating drug and alcohol policies to keep the devices off school grounds.

Bentworth revised its tobacco policy more than two years ago to prohibit e-cigarettes on school property, in order to “stay ahead of the ballgame.”



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Nicotine salt ejuice, according to vaping.com, is easier to inhale because it is less harsh on the throat than regular ejuice. It also allows the user to inhale more nicotine per puff. It is the type most commonly found in pod-mod-style devices.

Holly Tonini

At Peters Township School District, which also addresses e-cigarettes in its tobacco policy, students caught with e-cigarettes receive three days out-of-school suspension.

“It’s not something we take lightly,” said Shelly Belcher, communications coordinator for Peters Township School District. But we also try to do as much as we can with education, so if we catch a student, we refer them to the (Student Assistance Program). We want to provide education to kids and connect parents with resources.”

Bentworth School District also regularly posts information about e-cigarettes and vaping on its Facebook page.

“We put a great deal of information on our Facebook page, and we’ve had a really good response from parents,” said Martin. “I think parents have the perception that e-cigarettes are safe. But our main concern and what we’re fighting is that we don’t know what’s in them.”

In Greene County, Jefferson-Morgan School District Superintendent Joseph Orr said there have been a “handful” of incidents during the 2017-18 school year, and he anticipates incidents to rise as the popularity of the devices increases.

The district's current policies cover e-cigarettes and and vape pens.

Federal regulations prohibit anyone under the age of 18 from purchasing the devices, but use of e-cigarettes and battery-powered vaporizers among teens – who inhale vapors from nicotine mixed with liquid in flavors including gummy bear, cotton candy and Mountain Dew – has exploded. E-cigarettes and vape pens have become popular with teens over the last few years, but they aren't safe, according to Pennsylvania Deputy Secretary for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Dr. Loren Robinson.

Smoking the devices "delivers cancer-causing chemicals to the body, and the flavoring used by many teens in these devices appears to be the most dangerous. Normalizing smoking for young adults through e-cigarettes introduces them to a lifetime of addiction," said Robinson.

From 2011 to 2015, e-cigarette use in the United States increased by more than 900 percent, according to a recent report by the Surgeon General.

E-cigarettes and vape pens are part of a class of devices known as Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems, which also include e-hookahs, e-cigars and e-pipes.

E-cigarettes now come in easily concealed, high-tech designs. One of the most popular e-cigarettes, Juul, resembles a USB storage device and can be charged by plugging it into a USB port. Each Juul cartridge contains as much nicotine as an entire pack of cigarettes.

"Juuls are the new thing. Kids are Juuling now, and you hear about kids Juuling during class," said Martin. "They look just like a jump drive and a student could have one on the desk and you wouldn't even know it."

Pennsylvania high school students consume e-cigarettes at a rate higher than other students across the country. One in every four high school seniors in Pennsylvania reports having used an e-cigarette in a 30-day period, which is 10 percent higher than the national average. More teens used e-cigarettes in Pennsylvania in 2015, according to the 2015 Pennsylvania Youth Survey, than used cigarettes and smokeless tobacco.

Most of the teens involved in that survey reported using flavoring in their vaping device, but others reported using nicotine, marijuana or hash oil.

Experts are concerned about the impact e-cigarettes have on teens. According to a recent study in the journal Pediatrics, teens who use e-cigarettes are up to three times more likely to have dangerous chemicals in their systems than teens who do not use, including chemicals known to cause cancer.

Teens who use e-cigarettes are also twice as likely to start smoking traditional cigarettes.

The report goes on to say that youth and young adults are also at risk for long-term, long-lasting effects of exposing their developing brains to nicotine, including nicotine addiction, mood disorders and permanent lowering of impulse control.

Rebecca Ehrentraut, manager of Dubtown Vapes in Washington, said minors under 18 have tried to purchase e-cigarettes and vapes at the store, but they won't get served at the store unless they show a valid Pennsylvania ID card with a photo and a birthdate.

The store offers a large selection of vape flavors, including Boston creme donut and Fruit Loops, but also sells nicotine-free e-cigarette products.

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Tyler Whitt, product specialist, and Rebecca Ehrentraut are shown inside Dubtown Vapes off Henderson Avenue in Canton Township.

Holly Tonini

Annette Vietmeier, director of academic accountability and innovation at Central Greene School District, said district schools are not seeing the devices on school grounds (few Greene County school districts reported running across them), but teachers are addressing the issue in their curriculum both in the Life Skills training offered to grades three through 10 and the health classes' curriculum.

Peters Township's Belcher said parents have voiced concern about e-cigarette use, and at a recent Parent-Teacher Association meeting, a school resource officer brought in a variety of e-cigarettes to show parents what they look like.

"Having the support and interest of parents has been a good thing," said Belcher. "We want to pass along the message that we take this very seriously, and we want students and parents to be aware of the health risks they're taking when they use e-cigarettes."

Karen Mansfield

Staff Writer