

THE VAPING NATIONAL EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

MAY 2023



An Initiative of:

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

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About ARACY

For over 20 years ARACY – Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth – has been bringing people and knowledge together, to make change for the benefit of children and young people. ARACY is unique in linking all areas of wellbeing for children, young people, and their families.

We believe all children and young people should have the opportunity to thrive.

We strive to achieve this by championing evidence-based policy and practice, while forging alliances between government, policy making, research, philanthropy and service delivery with a focus on prevention, early support and engagement. We work for the creation of better systems and supportive environments, and to grow capability across the sector, improving outcomes for children and young people.

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Purpose

This report has been prepared to share with Health and Education Departments at a federal and state level. It highlights the key issues and identifies recommendations raised by participants at a virtual roundtable hosted by ARACY as well as recommendations made by the group.

We commend the Australian Government for its anti-vaping measures announced in May 2023 and put forward this report for consideration to share insights to guide the further development of appropriate and effective policies and to complement activities already underway.

Background

Recent research¹ shows that 32% of 14–17 year-olds have vaped at some stage in their lives.

Young people recognise that this is a problem, and many of them would like to quit vaping. Young people have identified supports they would find useful including education on how to navigate social pressures, teaching them about the health effects and risks of vaping, as well as where to go for support if they are concerned, they are becoming addicted. They have also called for a greater focus on adults selling vapes to children.

The Federal Health Minister in May 2023 announced² significant regulatory measures including stopping the importation and sale of non-prescription vapes, requiring pharmaceutical-like packaging, restricting flavours and colours, reducing the allowed amount of nicotine and banning all single use, disposable vapes.

On 23 May 2023 ARACY hosted a virtual roundtable, facilitated by the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly. The roundtable aimed to further discuss what young people have shared in recent research and explore practical strategies to support young people across schools and communities.

A wide range of organisations and individuals were invited to participate and share their insights. The roundtable was attended by State, Territory and Commonwealth Departments of Education and Health, researchers and academics, advocacy and representative groups, educators and health professionals as well and young people.

¹ Cancer Council NSW 2022, <https://www.cancercouncil.com.au/cancer-prevention/smoking/generation-vape/>

² The Hon Mark Butler MP, Minister for Health and Aged Care 2023, Media Release: Taking action on smoking and vaping. <https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-mark-butler-mp/media/taking-action-on-smoking-and-vaping?language=en>

Overview

With reference to the South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People's recent report, *Vaping Survey: Key Findings What do young people in South Australia think about current responses to vaping and how to better respond?*³ The focus for the roundtable was:

- What non-regulatory activities could we undertake to support young people to either quit vaping or not start vaping in the first place?
- How can the education sector support young people who are vaping or who are thinking of starting vaping? Who else should be involved?
- How can we better engage students, families and communities? How can we best support teachers and assist in the development and implementation of school policies? What are the barriers and enablers to achieving this engagement and support?



Image Source: Canva

³ South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People (2022) *Vaping Survey: Key Findings - What do young people in South Australia think about current responses to vaping and how to better respond?* Project Report No.33 <https://www.cyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Screen-Vaping-Survey-Key-Findings-Report.pdf>

Key Recommendations

Perhaps not surprisingly, the outcomes of the roundtable reiterated much of the messaging from young people in the Commissioner's earlier report: the need for better and wider support, a consistent approach and an understanding that vaping is often part of a bigger range of challenges for young people, all of which sit alongside the enthusiasm for removing vapes from the landscape.

So, what did participants want?

- Bring forward the passing of the proposed Australian legislation banning non-prescription vapes as soon as possible.
- Invest in a national information and resource portal suitable for schools, students, and the wider community.
- Support the research and data collection necessary to underpin an evidence-based approach.
- Deliver a multi-pronged public health campaign targeting young people, parents, and the wider community through social and traditional media.
- Develop "quitting" services specifically designed for young people.
- Develop national curriculum-linked resources suitable for quick adoption and appropriate for delivery to primary school students through to tertiary education levels, alongside no-cost professional learning for teachers.
- Provide funding options for schools to engage specialist guest speakers or adopt multimedia-based education programs to complement curriculum-embedded initiatives.
- Fund and train more school counsellors/psychologists to work in school settings.

Vaping detectors were not supported as a helpful measure, with participants recommending that funding be invested in supports for young people.

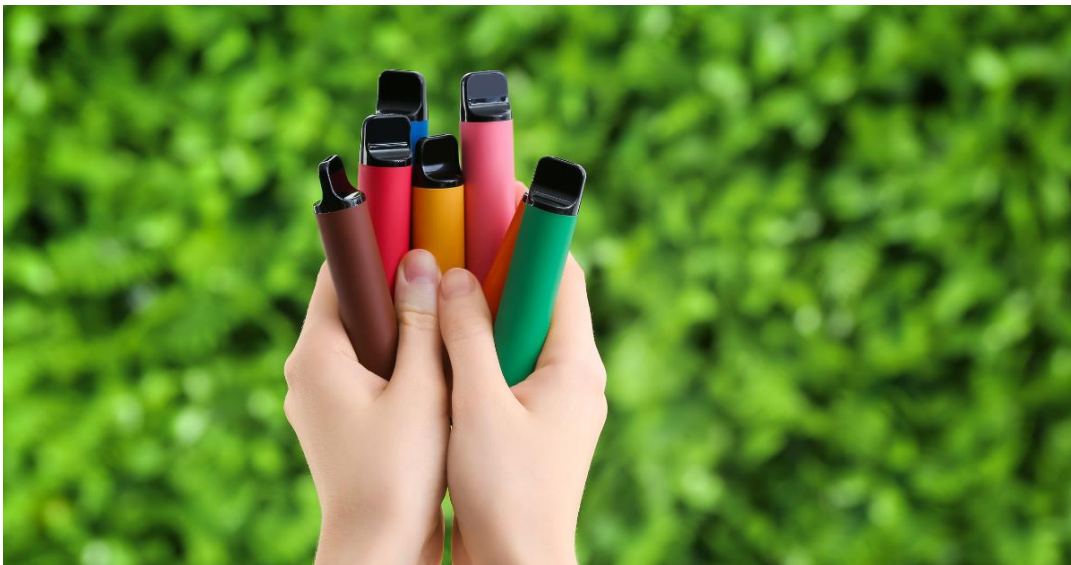


Image Source: Canva

Themes

Not just schools, please

While all participants agreed that schools had a valuable role in educating and supporting students around the issue of vaping, as they do in other areas of health and wellbeing, there was a strong sentiment that the issue should not be left to schools alone to manage.

“I would like to see a greater range of supports for family and community organisations (including sporting teams and social groups) rather than the strong focus on schools as the key agency for intervention.”

Teachers

Many schools across Australia are grappling with a teacher shortage, made more acute following the disruption of COVID. There was a strong view that many schools did not have the capacity to take on another program related to vaping.

To best prepare teachers to manage the issue, participants called for **easily accessible and free professional learning** options, that reflected a national consistency of approach from both government and non-government sectors. These resources should be updated regularly.

This education should focus on teachers acting as facilitators of conversations rather than simply delivering content. It should include social media literacy training, as well as perspectives on vaping’s impact on the environment, critical reflection on the tactics of big tobacco companies, and the impacts on the health of users. Professional learning should be tailored for primary and secondary school teachers.

“If teachers come across as not knowing everything or as too heavy handed, this can lead to students to go looking for credible content outside school where the algorithms will likely lead them to pro vaping material.”

School Counsellors and Psychologists

The important role of school counsellors and psychologists was raised, and it was agreed that they would be best placed to work with students where there is an identified addiction, as well as with students where vaping is a symptom of other behavioural or wellbeing issues, or mental health

challenges. This model would enable appropriate external support referrals to be made, but referral pathways first need to exist and be made clear to stakeholders.

Once again, the lack of staffing in this area was acknowledged as a problem, indicating a need for increased investment in this crucial school resource.

“We can’t expect schools to identify and respond to vaping but not have clear service pathways for supporting addiction.”

Curriculum

While some states, including New South Wales and South Australia, have updated local curricula to include vaping, many states have not. It was suggested that a national approach should be taken. Health and PE teachers were seen as the best teaching cohort to deliver vaping education, alongside existing drug and alcohol programming, with a focus on resilience and problem solving.

“Teachers are time poor: they need resources to make life easier.”

“In South Australia, curriculum updates have been released to include e-cigarettes for years 4, 9 and 10.”

“The NSW PDHPE curriculum pieces are really strong and build knowledge and critical thinking skills.”

“Are schools the best channel to reach young people? Tobacco companies are reaching them through other sources, and schools are not likely to be the most efficient or effective way to influence young vapers.”

“We need a clear curation of resources, and consistency in approach from government and non-government.”

Students

It was acknowledged that approximately 70% of students are NOT vaping, and that any resourcing for schools should empower teachers to capitalise on that statistic and encourage those students to be advocates for non-vaping. This directly reflects some of the findings from the Commissioner's vaping report, "young people reported that other young people are likely to be more effective 'messengers' than adults or 'authority figures.'"

The *Australian Student Wellbeing Framework* states its key goals as being student voice, partnerships, inclusion, leadership, and support. It was suggested that this framework be referenced in building a student advocacy approach.

Young people requested that the community focus more on those who are supplying vapes to young people rather than on disciplinary responses which punish users. They also said that greater efforts should be made to address the reasons students vape – stress, poor mental health, a poor sense of identity, and peer pressure.



Image Source: Canva

Central Information Point & Support

Participants made a clear call for a national leadership, with the creation of an evidence-based central repository of information, guidance, and resources for schools and the community more broadly.

Participants also highlighted a significant need for “quitting” services along with support that is specifically designed for young people.

Quitting Support Specifically for Young People

Growing numbers of students are seeking information on how they can quit vaping or help a friend who wants to quit.

Schools are increasingly being asked by students and their families for assistance in this area. Currently there are few places that young people or their families can go to for assistance with quitting vaping. Where these places do exist, they are not well known.

Resource Portal

Reflecting students’ calls in the Commissioner’s report for more public health information and campaigns, participants noted the need for a well-publicised single point of information, as it was believed that this would have more impact at a greater scale. This could build on the work done to provide information and guidance for schools in most jurisdictions.

It was reiterated that this information should be suitable for the wider community. While a central point of information was considered key, it was agreed that alongside a universal approach, specific messaging, educational tools, and support for specific target groups should also be developed and delivered.

The information provided should not only include facts and figures but also give guidance on broader related issues such as wellbeing, problem solving, managing peer pressure, mental health connections, and support agencies and services.

Questions were raised over nomenclature, should we use the term “e-cigarette”, or is “vaping” more well understood? And does it depend on context?

“Linking vaping to smoking (or calling them e-cigarettes instead of vapes) can be effective in terms of prevention.”

“We are aware of parents providing vapes to children as they don’t think it’s as harmful as cigarettes.”

“Vaping is typically used in a positive sense among people who use them - academics typically use ‘E-cigarettes’, ‘electronic cigarettes’ or ‘electronic nicotine delivery systems’.”

“Young people-specific ‘quitting vaping’ services need to be identified (if any exist) and information about those services disseminated. Simply saying ‘see your GP’ is pointless in most cases.”

Holistic Approach

There was discussion about the need for vaping to fit within a more holistic approach to student health and wellbeing.

Some participants felt that this approach should not place the school at the centre, as they were concerned that it expected too much of already stressed educational resources. At the same time, other participants talked of the longer-term concept of schools being embedded within a multi-faceted health and wellbeing “hub”.

This concept was recently explored in the paper⁴ by Pasi Sahlberg, Sharon Goldfeld, Jon Quach, Caitlin Senior and Cecilia Sinclair, where they discuss shifting the purpose of school from solely an academic focus to equally focusing on learning, wellbeing to enhance overall child and youth development.

“Don’t ‘wrap around school’ this places school at the centre they are not resourced for this. They are not health practitioners, focus support on families to make better decisions.”

“Evidence supports combining multiple areas of wellbeing to tackle issues like vaping i.e.: mental health and resilience. Assertive refusal, social influences, what addiction looks like, understanding triggers – goes across all substances.”

⁴ Sahlberg, Pasi; Goldfeld, Sharon; Quach, Jon; Senior, Caitlin; Sinclair, Cecilia (2023). Reinventing Australian schools for the better wellbeing, health and learning of every child. Murdoch Childrens Research Institute. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.22766825.v2>

Legislation is a Crucial Signal for School Policy and Responses

All participants were pleased and relieved about the proposed national legislation to ban non-prescription vapes and about the associated education supports.

It was agreed that this incoming change will make instituting and enforcing school anti-vaping policy much easier. The group encouraged the Australian government to enact the required legislation as soon as possible.

A Basis for School Policy

While there is understanding that schools need to be able to modify responses to allow for localised issues and challenges, there was a consensus that starting from the same basis school policy-wise would be useful to ensure a more unified and consistent response.

It was agreed that **more effective uniform responses** to catching a young person vaping need to be developed, tested and rolled out. Stanford University's Alternative-to-Suspension educational program⁵ was particularly referenced.

"We can't just educate our way out of this, the national policy focus on access is really important as it signals the gravity of the issue and ensures young people know that these products aren't a consumer good for anyone and everyone to use."

"Where a school behaviour policy has one action for smoking and a different one for vaping, it reinforces one is different from the other."

"NSW principals took this [vaping as an issue] to government in 2019. Unfortunately, there was no interest back then, so now we're playing catch up."

"Lack of policy causes challenges as schools will otherwise create their own journey; policy needs to be consistent and simple."

"Kids are saying if they can pick up a vape at local store alongside an energy drink, it can't be that bad."

⁵ Stanford Medicine, Healthy Futures <https://med.stanford.edu/halpern-felsher-reach-lab/preventions-interventions/healthy-futures.html>

Confusing Messages Internationally

With several countries, including New Zealand, actively promoting vaping, and the UK Government's program to give away vapes as a smoking cessation support, Australians using vapes are faced with confusing messaging, particularly children and young people who find most of their news and information on "borderless" social media apps.

Alongside the legislative changes, more work needs to be done on public health messaging to clarify vaping risks and benefits.

"Why we were so successful in reducing smoking rates is that there were no 'positives' in relation to that activity. 'Smoking kills' is such a simple message and we don't have a message like that for vaping."

Punitive Approaches

While everyone acknowledged the importance of a holistic, wellbeing approach to working with students who are vaping, some participants felt that a punitive aspect was also a necessary complement.

"In a school of 1000 students, if I don't do something about the student who is vaping, this will spread across the rest of school... It gets to a point where there is no option other than treating it as a punitive manner for the benefit for everyone at the school."

"Ultimately there needs to be a consequence if educative interventions have not worked. For many students, the perception that nothing happens is an absolute encouragement."

“We know simply suspending a student is not effective. Adapting the successful ‘in-school suspension’ responses that were developed for smoking in the 1980s would be a smart move.”

Detectors

There was discussion around the issue of vape detectors, following recent moves by some schools to install them, and reports that some departments of education are considering widespread implementation.

There was a generally negative response to vape detectors, with issues of privacy, legal implications and the resourcing required to monitor and respond to detections being put forward as the main areas of concern. It was generally felt that any money earmarked for detectors would be better invested in preventative measures.

“Detectors require significant monitoring and give rise to the questions of legality and surveillance.”

“There’s not strong evidence for vape detectors using them will lean towards a punitive approach, targeting individuals.”



Image Source: Canva

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all the participants and contributors to the roundtable, with appreciation to Helen Connolly, South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People, for leading and guiding the discussions.

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Appendix 1

Current Anti-Vaping or Student Support Resources

Blurred Minds – an initiative of Griffith University, with a “gamified” range of educational programs.
<https://www.blurredminds.com.au/>

NSW Health – short video showing the impact of vaping and nicotine on the brain.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-wZzbs463M>

Our Futures - Recommended for holistic early intervention/prevention programs.
<https://ourfuturesinstitute.org.au>

PERU - The Preventive Education Research Unit in Western Sydney has a program to engage students in non-punitive educational responses to vaping: The Unpacking Vaping in Schools Project
<https://peru-programs.sydney.edu.au/unpacking-vaping/>

Positive Choices - E-cigarette page
<https://positivechoices.org.au/>

Stanford University’s Healthy Futures/Alternative to Suspension Curriculums
<https://med.stanford.edu/tobaccopreventiontoolkit/curriculum-decision-maker/HealthyFutures.html>

Tik Tok - An example of the sorts of social media videos that could be developed to engage young people (perhaps with more health messaging) – language warning!
https://www.tiktok.com/@liam_dowling/video/7080796220247018754

Truth Initiative - Mental health and vaping – US site
<https://truthinitiative.org/our-top-issues/vaping-issue>

Appendix 2

Examples of national tracking of e-cigarette/vaping use

Ash - NZ

<https://www.ash.org.nz/>

Ash – UK

<https://ash.org.uk/resources/view/use-of-e-cigarettes-among-young-people-in-great-britain>

ASSAD - The National Australian Secondary School Students Alcohol and Drug Survey, explores adolescent substance use in Australia. It was noted that this currently only accounts for students aged 16+ in NSW contributed data.

<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/australian-secondary-school-students-alcohol-and-drug-survey>

Smoking in England

<https://smokinginengland.info/graphs/e-cigarettes-latest-trends>

Appendix 3

Broader Frameworks Relevant to the Management of Vaping

Australian Student Wellbeing Framework (2020) Student voice, partnerships, inclusion, leadership and support are key goals. <https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/framework/>