

Your Ref:  
Our Ref:

3 March 2023

Tim Bullard  
Secretary  
Department for Education, Children and Young People  
By email: [OfficeoftheSecretary@decyp.tas.gov.au](mailto:OfficeoftheSecretary@decyp.tas.gov.au)

Dear Secretary,

### **Vaping in Schools: What I have heard from CCYP Ambassadors**

I am writing to you to provide a summary and direct quotes of what I have heard from CCYP Ambassadors regarding vaping in schools.

The views of these Tasmanian children and young people bring to life some of the recent literature regarding the experiences, perspectives and views of children and young people on vaping. I believe this information is useful to inform policy development and/or projects regarding vaping in schools. Now in its fifth year, the CCYP Ambassador Program is made up of over 80 Tasmanian children and young people from across the state ranging from 10 to 17 years of age from a wide range of socio-economic, cultural and geographical backgrounds.

My role as Tasmania's Commissioner for Children and Young People is to advocate for the rights and wellbeing of all children and young people in Tasmania generally. Key functions of my role under the [Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2016](#) (CCYP Act) include researching, investigating and influencing policy development in areas relating to children and young people, and promoting, monitoring and reviewing the wellbeing of children and young people.

An important part of my role is to promote the participation of children and young people in decision-making within organisations and to promote meaningful opportunities for children and young people to express their views, share their experiences and contribute to decision-making processes in matters that affect them. Consulting with students early in the development of policies, and embedding participatory mechanisms in the policy process, directly recognise the right of the child to express their views in accordance with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and National Principle 2 for Child Safe Organisations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, Principle 2: Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.



In performing my functions under the CCYP Act, I am required to do so according to the principle that the wellbeing and best interests of children and young people are paramount and observe any relevant provisions of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC)<sup>2</sup>.

The provisions of the [UNCRC](#) of particular relevance to my consideration of vaping in schools, include the rights of the child to:

- protection from the illicit use of drugs, and the use of children in illicit production and trafficking of drugs (Article 33);
- the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health (Article 24);
- express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity (Article 12).

My work must also be performed according to the principles that the contributions made by children and young people should be recognised for their value and merit, and that the views of children and young people on all matters affecting them should be given serious consideration and taken into account.

Concerns specific to the use of vapes and exposure to vape use by others were consistent and recurring in my conversations with CCYP Ambassadors. Themes span a broad range of concerns including access to and use of vapes in schools, social acceptance and peer pressure to vape, health literacy and education, and support needs for children and young people seeking assistance to address addiction and underlying causes of vaping.

Children and young people recognise the ongoing impact of drug use, including the use of vapes, to societal participation and the safety of individuals, communities and the population more broadly. For example, one CCYP Ambassador has said:

*I want to improve the safety of the community and this to then flow into the rest of Tasmania. I live and go to school in an area where there are a lot of drugs easily available to young people and children and I can see this is a huge safety risk to people I go to school with and my closer friend groups. I want to keep young people safe. I see this is hugely impacting on education and young people's ability to gain work or finish school. Some people even come to school under the influence of drugs. This is a risk to themselves but also other innocent people and that's not fair on anyone. (CCYP Ambassador, 2019)*

Included below, are direct quotes from CCYP Ambassadors which are generally representative of feedback received from children and young people across the state during regular meetings between 2019 and 2022. Please note that these quotes are presented verbatim to accurately reflect the views of CCYP Ambassadors as conveyed to me by them in their own words.

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<sup>2</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2016 (Tas) s 3(1).



## Access to and use of vapes in schools

The use of electronic cigarettes (or 'vaping') is on the rise in Australia, including among young people, and as the evidence base on the health impacts of vaping grows, so does community concern. The most current advice from Australia's National Health Council clearly states that *'the vapour from e-cigarette devices can be harmful and there is limited evidence that e-cigarettes are effective at helping smokers quit'*<sup>3</sup>.

From 2016 to 2019, electronic cigarette (e-cigarette) use more than doubled among Australians aged 14 or older<sup>4</sup> and in the year to 2021, more than seven per cent of 15- to 17-year-olds had used an e-cigarette or vaping device<sup>5</sup>. Results of the 2017 Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey (ASSAD) show approximately 14 per cent of 12- to 17-year-olds (2,403 students) reported having tried e-cigarettes<sup>6</sup>. Close to half of these students (48%) said they had never smoked a tobacco cigarette prior to their first vape and of these, around a quarter reported subsequently trying tobacco cigarettes<sup>7</sup>.

In my conversations with CCYP Ambassadors, they shared their experiences of how easy it is to access vapes. Some CCYP Ambassadors were not aware that vaping was illegal for people under 18 years of age. Further, vapes inclusive of nicotine required a prescription as they felt vapes are so easily available. What I heard from Ambassadors about their experiences accessing vapes were:

*Anyone can really go and get it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*So many people are doing it, seems normal. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Pretty easy to get a hold of. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*I wasn't aware that you needed a prescription. The amount of young people I know who vape do not have a prescription so it's not being regulated enough. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

CCYP Ambassadors discussed how students are able to easily access vapes by purchasing vapes online, at retail shops or through their older friends, siblings and sometimes even their parents. Importantly, schools were seen as a common place for students to be exposed to vaping. For example:

*Pretty easy to get hold of. If you did an anonymous survey, probably 25-30% kids vape. Doing it really regularly. Even in class, stick hand in pocket and have a vape. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Older people are buying for them ... buy from another kid who gets them from older students. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

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<sup>3</sup> National Health and Medical Research Council (2022) [CEO Statement on E-cigarettes](#), accessed 29 June 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Lung Foundation Australia (2021) [Fact sheets for educators: Vaping and Young People](#), Lung Foundation Australia, accessed 14 June 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) [Smoking: 2020-21 financial year](#), accessed 14 June 2022. Note, under-reporting of e-cigarette or vaping use in young people may have occurred because responses were provided by an adult living in the same household (77.3% of people aged 15-17 were reported on by another person in the household).

<sup>6</sup> Guerin N and White V (2020) [ASSAD 2017 Statistics & Trends: Australian Secondary Students' Use of Tobacco, Alcohol, Over-the-counter Drugs, and Illicit Substances](#), second edition, Cancer Council Victoria.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



*You buy them from students ... it's \$50 for a vape. Well \$40 for the vape, \$10 for the person getting the vape for you. The flavours need to be brought separately for like \$20. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

My conversations with CCYP Ambassadors also indicate that there may be a growing contraband market for vape kits and products among students, with word of lucrative rackets operating on social media and in Tasmanian schools. Trading of vapes through social media such as Snapchat and in schools was mentioned by Ambassadors as an easy way for students to gain access to vapes. One Ambassador explained that:

*Some kids at my school have made their entire money off it, they don't have jobs or nothing, but they are earning \$1000 a week from shipping in these vapes and selling them on for double the price using snap chat stories. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

Vaping in bathrooms, classrooms and spaces that are hard for teachers to see was also raised as a significant issue. Some CCYP Ambassadors shared how they know which toilets not to go to or avoid the bathroom while at school to stay away from the “vapers”. They also told me that vaping is occurring during classes. Here are a sample of what some Ambassador shared about their experiences of vaping on school grounds:

*Teachers have decided they are going to camp out in our bathrooms because everyone is doing it in the bathroom. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*It's easy to bring vapes into schools. Easier to hide in school uniform pockets. Keep it inside pockets, no one is going to notice. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*At my school lots of people do it and like there was like a boy the other day was doing it in my class that was doing it in class and the teachers are kind of oblivious to it because they don't know what to look for, but the kids see it every time. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

Many CCYP Ambassadors felt that the easy access to vapes and exposure to vaping in schools meant it was only a matter of time until more people succumb to the social pressure to vape. When I asked about how vaping in schools made them feel, several CCYP Ambassadors shared how students vaping made them feel unsafe and their concerns about talking about vaping in schools:

*My issue is with safety at schools. A lot of people say the toilets are unsafe. It's a weird topic but people do go in there and smoke and people rip the doors off while people are in there doing their business. People kick the doors down and a lot of people say this at my school. (CCYP Ambassador, 2021)*

*Do you really want to be known as the snitch that went and talked about vaping to teachers? Everyone will hate you. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*If you dob in one person, it at least involves everyone else as it is a spiderweb of connections. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*



## Social acceptance and peer pressure

Recent conversations I have had with young people involved in my CCYP Ambassador Program indicate, at least anecdotally, that vaping is growing in popularity among Tasmania's young people. The volume and reach of vaping among young people appear to be increasing, with perceptions of 'coolness' driving uptake across an expanded student population. Here is sample of what CCYP Ambassadors told me:

*It's cool. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Only the cool kids do it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Even the sporty boys are doing it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*At parties you get handed it, and you're the cool one, everyone at the party wants to come and talk to you. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Once everyone starts doing it you start getting peer pressure to do it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*People do it because then all the people will always want to talk to them. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

CCYP Ambassadors spoke of the appeal of vaping and how young people were targeted with advertising products such as bubble gum and fairy floss flavoured vapes and how the flavours and sharing of vapes were seen as a large part of the appeal of vaping. For example:

*There is a new vape shop in town, which is only quite new, and there are different flavours like bubble gum and fairy floss. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*The flavours are appealing to people my age. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*They are like cigarettes, its harmful, except it has flavour so it appeals to more people. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*People think it's cool because the way they advertise vaping is like really appealing to teenagers my age because there are flavours, and it never runs out and it's like smoking but it's better for you and you won't get addicted. Except for the fact it's a flavour and you get addicted to it because you want it again. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

Recent research on the knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and influences on teen vaping in Western Australia, [Being Gen Vape](#) indicates that young people do not see vaping as part of their identity like they do smokers; it seen as something they do and not who they 'are'.<sup>8</sup> Vaping use is also not a dichotomy of people who vape, and people who don't. Instead, vaping falls along a continuum, with the opportunities and peer pressure to try vaping occurring when young people felt vulnerable and there was an opportunity present to try

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<sup>8</sup> van Bueren, D., van der Beeke, L., Grainger, A. and Petrut, R. Being Gen Vape (2022), *Exploratory research on the knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and influences on teen vaping in Western Australia*, The Behaviour Change Collaborative, accessed February 2023.



vaping for the first time. This then could lead to young people becoming committed to vaping, then dependent; with age having no bearing on the results.<sup>9</sup> For example:

*They would have to admit they are vaping. They talk about it openly but if you ask them if they vape, they so 'what? No!'. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*A boy in class vapes. He is in my grade so like 12 or no 11 years old and he is pretty good at hiding it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

While the research findings of *Being Gen Vape*<sup>10</sup> are not generalisable to the Tasmanian population, there are some similarities between the views and experiences CCYP Ambassadors expressed in my conversations with them, and those expressed through the *Being Gen Vape* research. For example, when asked why they think young people would take up vaping, they expressed to me that it was about social acceptance, a desire to fit in, curiosity, and or a new way to connect to their peers. Young people also noted the influence of peer pressure and that it can be difficult to say no in a school setting. This was evident in my discussions with CCYP Ambassadors with several describing their experiences of feeling pressured to vape:

*Once everyone starts doing it you start getting peer pressure to do it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*It's 'cool'. Very pressured. Certain bathrooms that are vaping places, you don't go as pressure to do it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*There is particular places you don't go because it's like 'have some, have some' and you go 'ahh'. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

## **Health literacy and education**

It appears that misconceptions that e-cigarettes and vapes are 'safer' than traditional cigarettes and are 'only water vapour'<sup>11</sup> are possibly contributing to increased uptake among young people, including those who historically may have been less likely to try smoking.

The Western Australian *Being Gen Vape* study found that teenagers perceived the lack of health warnings on packaging, ease of access and vaping being normalised in the school setting as evidence that vaping is not as bad as other drugs such as tobacco, creating a cognitive dissonance for young people.<sup>12</sup> In my discussions with CCYP Ambassadors, they shared their varied experiences of their education and understanding of the risks associated with vaping:

*I don't know much about vaping. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*I've had no information – I don't know really what it is. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

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<sup>9</sup> van Bueren, D., van der Beeke, L., Grainger, A. and Petrut, R. *Being Gen Vape (2022), Exploratory research on the knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and influences on teen vaping in Western Australia*, The Behaviour Change Collaborative, accessed February 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Quit Tasmania (2022) [Mythbusting: e-cigarettes](#), Cancer Council Tasmania, accessed 17 June 2022.

<sup>12</sup> van Bueren, D., van der Beeke, L., Grainger, A. and Petrut, R. *Being Gen Vape (2022), Exploratory research on the knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and influences on teen vaping in Western Australia*, the Behaviour Change Collaborative, accessed February 2023.



*Everyone is doing it. It can't possibly be that dangerous. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Is it as bad as smoking cigarettes? (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*There's no information about vaping at schools ... we had a single lesson in Year 7 Health class about it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*A person came in talking about it, but people just mocked it and take it as a joke as they don't really understand or take it seriously. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*In Health, vaping has come up. The health teacher says he can't say what we can and can't do but highly suggests don't do it has it has lots of other bad health outcomes. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*There are posters at school about it, but we haven't had anyone tell us that we shouldn't do it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

Other CCYP Ambassadors shared that their peers are aware that vaping is bad for them but don't care or are not interested. They are not convinced of their personal susceptibility to the potential health consequences vaping may cause, as these consequences are inconsistent with their own experiences. This could indicate young people only have a superficial awareness of the health risks of vaping and consider it 'safe enough' because the long-term impacts are too far removed from their experience to be considered a possibility. For example, Ambassadors shared that:

*There might be medical evidence, but it might not be available to the public or like widely accessible to students or the young adults that are doing it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Lots of people are saying vaping is better than smoking but is just as addictive. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*People want to do it because it's more risky so if we ban it, we drive more people to it instead of away from it. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Vaping originally was supposed to be a healthier alternative to cigarettes. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*They want to keep vaping and don't want to stop so why would they openly admit that they do. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*People won't listen to facts. They'll be like 'oh it's just another big thing about something that is horrible for me' and joke about it ... that is what people in my class do. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

## Support

Vaping is explicitly recognised in existing Tasmanian Government strategies, including the [Smoke Free Young People 2019-2021 Strategy](#), which identifies the need to better understand awareness and use of e-cigarettes in efforts to normalise being 'smoke free' (Action 3.4<sup>13</sup>), the Tobacco Action Plan 2022-2026 (Action Areas 2 and 3) and the [Healthy](#)

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<sup>13</sup> Action 3.4: Consult with young Tasmanians about their awareness and use of electronic cigarettes, [Smoke free Young People 2019-2021 Strategy](#)



[Tasmania Five-Year Strategic Plan 2022-2026](#) in which the Government commits to funding a *Smoking Prevention Package for Young People* that would include a 'strong focus' on education and action to discourage e-cigarette use.<sup>14</sup>

Based on my discussions with children and young people, there is a clear need to increase access to education and support services for young people in Tasmania for the cessation of vaping. Some CCYP Ambassadors acknowledge that students who vape are not always trying to be cool as it can be addictive and hard to stop, and some students are just not aware of the health risks of vaping.

*I know [a student] who is trying to stop smoking, because he is addicted to it. A kid my age, which is 15 by the way, which is really young, is trying to stop smoking so he is vaping instead. Because vaping is better, but I don't think that's accurate, but he is also sourcing them illegally. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Lots of people are saying vaping is better than smoking but is just as addictive. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*It's to do with one, social pressure ... but also like with things that happen outside of school, which kind of drive how they perceive their education because you don't know what happens behind closed doors, you don't know what their homelife is like, so you don't know how they/re feeling, how they're thinking and there is a lot of opportunity to talk to someone, but there is also not, if that makes sense. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*People are afraid to talk to someone at school, as they are afraid of the consequences at home or in amongst their friend groups because like [ambassador] said, they might be exiled. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Some people need to vape. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*I think kids need to be cracked down on a lot because these drug issues are getting out of hand especially the vaping. It's not just eshays or bogans that are doing this anymore. It's everyday kids. It's the kids that were getting good grades, but you know, the pressure got a bit hard. It was the kids that, "oh, I/m bored, I want to look popular" and it's really scary how accessible it is for kids. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

Suggestions made by Ambassadors in addressing the problem of vaping in schools include the use of celebrities, influencers and role models to deliver the message about vaping and receiving education about the harms of smoking and vaping from a younger age. For example:

*Get people in like sportspeople and stuff. You can have your role models telling you. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

*Something I feel would benefit young Tasmanians is a better education on the effects of drugs and smoking along with help for them to stop. I think we should find a way to show the true factor drug use and drinking from a young age. In a way that speaks to the young people in a way that they take it seriously and don't*

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<sup>14</sup> Focus Area 6. Smoke-free communities, [Healthy Tasmania Five-Year Strategic Plan 2022-2026](#)





*just brush it off and continue the habit. I believe that if we find a way to change it now, we can prevent any further damage in the future. (CCYP Ambassador, 2022)*

## **Conclusion**

The message is clear that children and young people have a lot to say about vaping in schools and their views and experiences are varied. CCYP Ambassadors have emphasised the need for further consultation with students about how to address the complex issue of vaping in schools. Further, CCYP Ambassadors have emphasised the need for adults to properly understand vaping from a young person's perspective to inform and enrich policy development regarding vaping in Tasmanian schools. With this in mind, I strongly encourage you to consult further with children and young people throughout the development of any policies associated with vaping in Tasmanian schools.

I hope this information is of assistance to you. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss any matter raised in this letter further with you should you wish.

Yours sincerely

**Leanne McLean**

Commissioner for Children and Young People

cc *The Hon Roger Jaensch, Minister for Education, Children and Youth*  
cc *Mr Tony Crehan, Executive Director, Independent Schools Tasmania*  
cc *Dr Gerard Gaskin, Executive Director, Catholic Education Tasmania*  
cc *Ruth Davidson,*