

# ADDRESSING SUBSTANCE USE AND VAPING IN KENTUCKY SCHOOLS

## ALARMING INCREASES

*There is an increase in substance use among our youth. While there is a large increase across grade levels, there is an alarming increase among our youngest students. (Source: Infinite Campus)*

**Drugs, Alcohol and Tobacco Events in Kentucky increases from 2017-18 to 2022-23 in elementary, middle and high school.**

**457%**

**ELEMENTARY**  
from 120 to 805

**281%**

**MIDDLE**  
from 2,336 to 8,912

**107%**

**HIGH**  
from 8,995 to 18,651



## THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

According to the most recent Kentucky Incentive for Prevention ([KIP](#)) survey, **students who experience serious psychological distress were 2.5 times more likely to vape, 2.5 times more likely to use cannabis, and 3 times more likely to use cigarettes** (Source: 2021 KIP survey). A [recent study](#) found that adolescents reported the motivation for using substances was “to feel mellow, calm or relaxed” (73%), “to stop worrying,” (44%), or to “help with depression or anxiety” (40%). Adolescents reported using substances both with friends (81%) and alone (50%). In this video clip, [students describe using vaping as a coping strategy](#) for mental health issues.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

Many studies show that **students who feel connected at school and at home are less likely to exhibit substance use**, mental health problems and other negative health outcomes, which suggests that a schoolwide approach to **improving school climate, culture and connections (such as restorative practices)** should reduce substance use (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam & Johnson, 2014).



**Working towards warmer, healthier and encouraging school climates** can support ALL students, and especially students experiencing psychological distress. Currently in Kentucky, 12% of elementary, 27% of middle and 30% of high school students do not feel school is an encouraging place. (Source: Kentucky School Report Card 2022-2023 Quality of School Climate and Safety Survey)

# RESOURCES AND RESPONSES TO CONSIDER

## Support Prevention Efforts

- Use current campaigns resources to raise awareness in your school:
  - [Empower Vape-Free Youth Campaign | Electronic Cigarettes | Smoking & Tobacco Use | CDC](#)
  - [No More Boxes Campaign](#)
  - [Vapes are Trash Campaign](#)
  - [Kentucky Youth Anti-Vaping Campaign](#)
- Contact your [Regional Prevention Center](#) for support and prevention education. There are also adolescent treatment specialists available to work with your school through the [community mental health centers](#).
- As a proactive education measure, provide teachers with these free digital guided [curriculums to Address Vaping Nicotine & Prescription Drug Misuse](#). Stanford Medicine offers a [free toolkit for elementary, middle and high school students on cannabis prevention](#).
- Create [supportive spaces](#) and peer support circles for youth to safely and openly discuss substance pressures/usage.
- Foster warm and encouraging spaces. Monitor your [school climate data](#) and your [discipline data](#) to examine your schools trends. You can review your Quality of School Climate and Safety data on the Kentucky School Report Card, as well as your discipline data (via [Insights in Infinite Campus](#) or [data visualizations](#)) to examine trends and areas for improvement.
- Continue implementing your trauma informed district/school plan and review the [trauma informed discipline toolkit](#).

## Respond with a Supportive Approach

- [Avoid punishment and criminalization of substance use](#) behaviors as this exacerbates the problem and does not address root causes.
- [Engage student voices](#) about their experiences so that your responses will be rooted in their experiences, not in what we think. Ask students to share their real world experiences with vaping and substance use in a non-threatening manner and what support they need to address peer pressure or addictions that have developed.
- Post this [list of behavioral supports](#) that can help youth quit smoking, vaping and/or using other tobacco products from The American Academy of Pediatrics.
- Consider [assessing adolescents for substance use disorders](#) in order to create a personalized treatment plan that is tailored to the dependence issue
- Use this as a guide for the graphics/information to include on [responding](#) to students vaping.

## Review and Update School/District Policies and Practices

- The Kentucky Department of Education has released [guidance](#) for several bills including, [House Bill 142](#), which requires each local board of education to amend its written policies that prohibit the use of tobacco, alternative nicotine products and vapor products to include the distribution of evidence-based, age-appropriate prevention and cessation materials to **all students** at the beginning of each school year and access to evidence-based, age-appropriate nicotine prevention and cessation material throughout the school year for all students in the district. Upon the first behavior incident related to tobacco, alternative nicotine, or vapor products, the student must be referred to the school counselor or other school-based mental health services provider to review the adopted prevention and cessation materials. KDE encourages districts to review the best practices for curbing student substance use and focus on behavioral responses that support evidence-based treatment options. The Kentucky Department for Public Health recommends that school districts review best practices provided in the Public Health Law Center's publication [Commercial Tobacco-Free K-12 School Model Policy](#).
- Consider revising policies to focus on prevention and education strategies, as well as restorative responses. Check out this Center for Disease Control (CDC) resource on [alternatives to suspension](#) for students who are caught vaping in schools.
- [One Kentucky district](#) created a standard practice across all their secondary schools to deliver lessons on the harmful effects of vaping products, how companies in the vaping industry advertise to youth and simulate scenarios for students to practice refusal.
- This American Heart Association [guide](#) was developed for tobacco use policies and procedures in schools and includes checklists of key components that can support a sound code of conduct for vaping and substance use.

