FDA warning comes late amid EV vaping epidemic

By Jim Walsh, Tribune Staff Writer   Sep 16, 2018

Smoking in the boy’s room has morphed into vaping in the boys and girls’ room as the national e-cigarette vaping epidemic engulfs East Valley schools — possibly making teenagers a new generation hooked on nicotine.

Two East Valley school districts began fighting back before the U.S Food and Drug Administration last week declared teen vaping a national epidemic and took aim at e-cigarette manufacturers, threatening them with additional regulation and forcing them to come up with plans to stop minors from buying e-cigarettes.

Acting on the results of an undercover sting operation, the FDA also issued 1,300 civil fines and a warning letter to retailers that illegally sold the e-cigarettes to minors.

But the FDA warning comes well after hundreds of kids even in East Valley middle schools have been caught up in vaping.

“There has been a noticeable increase of vaping occurring with our students this year, both on campus and off campus,” Gilbert Public Schools warned parents in March. “This is not exclusive to GPS; it is occurring on campuses everywhere in our area, state and nationwide.”

At a forum sponsored by the Ahwatukee Foothills Chamber of Commerce in June, two area superintendents — Kevin Mendivil of Tempe Union and Jan Vesely of Kyrene — both said vaping had become an enormous problem.
While Mesa and Chandler, like all districts, forbid all forms of tobacco use, it is unclear if they have taken any special measures to curb vaping among their students.

But Kyrene and Tempe Union are trying to fight the dangerous trend.

Kyrene is leading the state by becoming the first district in Arizona to test a new kind of monitor. Kyrene officials are installing the monitors in the bathrooms of Aprende Middle School in Chandler that detect vaping fumes and alert school officials via an email or text.

Vesely said principals alerted her last spring that vaping was a growing problem at middle schools and that they were spending an inordinate amount of time patrolling bathrooms to crack down on vapers.

She said vaping students were intimidating the non-vaping students, threatening them with violence if they reported their activity.

The problem stems partly from the addictive quality of vaping and partly from the way these e-cigarettes are made.

Students as young as 10 are attracted by the sleek Juul e-cigarettes, which look like flash drives. Experts say the devices also entice children with fruity flavors and that most teens don’t even realize that the e-cigarettes contain nicotine, a highly addictive, insidious drug that makes it hard for many smokers to quit.

Calling it “the most commonly used form of tobacco by youth in the U.S.,” the Centers for Disease Control reported last year that “there is already enough evidence to justify efforts to prevent e-cigarette use by young people.

‘Wet lung’ on rise
“We know that the vapor from e-cigarettes is harmful because it contains harmful ingredients, including nicotine. Nicotine exposure during adolescence can cause addiction and can harm the developing brain,” the CDC said, estimating that the e-cigarette industry does $2.5 billion in business annually.

Teens also risk developing “wet lung” after vaping for only three weeks. The condition can lead to respiratory failure and the need to be placed on a breathing machine.

Vesely said members of student councils at middle schools pleaded with her for help when she held her regular monthly meeting with them in May.

“Every single middle school, every single middle school representative, said ‘You need to do something about vaping,’’ Vesely recalled, adding that they identified vaping as the thing they like least about school.

“It was something I was concerned about, but I didn’t know it was going down to our middle schools,” she said.

Vesely said Kyrene negotiated a pilot program with Suter Technologies, a New York company that makes the Fly Sense 2 vape detection and bullying alert system.

Kyrene plans to install the monitors in seventh and eighth grade bathrooms at Aprende, at a cost of about $900 each.

Vesely said that school administrators in other districts are closely watching the Kyrene experiment to see if the monitors might improve their defense against vaping.

“It’s not going to stop vaping but, we hope it will deter vaping,” Vesely said.
The Tempe Union High School District also is working to curb the epidemic through an educational video campaign by Marcos De Niza High School’s student council.

The plan is to post the videos on social media platforms with the goal of convincing students who have never vaped to avoid it — and to warn those who vape that they will face a sliding scale of suspensions if they are caught doing it on campus, said Jennifer Liewer, a district spokeswoman.

She said 65 incidents of vaping have been reported on Tempe Union campuses in the first five weeks of the current school year.

The offenders included 11 freshman, 21 sophomores, 28 juniors and five seniors — 51 boys and 14 girls.

But Liewer and students participating in the video project readily acknowledge that the e-cigarette epidemic is far more pervasive than the statistics suggest.

Popular across the board

Students Tyler Marquez and Matt Bergevin estimated that as many as seven out of 10 students at their school are vapers. Bergevin said a group of vapers sit in the “stoners” section at high school football games, passing e-cigarettes to each other and taking hits.

Bergevin said he has friends who acknowledge vaping is bad for their health, but they are unwilling to quit, seemingly unaware not only of nicotine’s dangers but also the long-term danger to their lungs posed by the chemical aerosol they are inhaling.

While conventional cigarettes have become socially unacceptable, e-cigarettes are the opposite, he said. Vaping is popular in all segments of the student
body, including students who get good grades and play sports.

“We complain about not having gas money, and then we drop $50 on a vape. It makes no sense,” Bergevin said. “Those same people say, I’ll never smoke a (conventional) cigarette. That’s gross, that’s foul.”

Marquez said students greatly underestimate nicotine addiction and don’t comprehend that an e-cigarette is similar to a conventional cigarette, with both of them serving as nicotine delivery devices.

“It’s not good to put anything in your lungs except oxygen,” he said. “Addiction runs very strongly in my family. It extremely scares me. That’s why I am so strongly against it.”

Hailey White, a volleyball player, said she is under a lot of stress to get good grades, but she realizes that there are better ways to cope with stress than relying on nicotine or other drugs.

“I think it’s a complete excuse,” White said. “I am an athlete. I am taking honors classes. I don’t want to be sold to nicotine.”

Arizona’s smoking rate has dropped to 15 percent after enactment of a torrent of tax increases, smoking restrictions and public health campaigns designed to deter the habit over the course of several decades.

But experts on addiction, such as Stephanie Siete, a spokeswoman for the Community Bridges behavioral health agency, and University of Arizona professor Judith Gordon, worry that all these advances are being undermined by the increasingly popularity of e-cigarettes.

Siete said national surveys have found that only 4 percent of teens smoke conventional cigarettes while 36 percent have tried vaping.
$2.5 billion industry targets kids

“This is blowing up all over the country, vaping and oils,” Siete said. “It’s a universal thing that a lot of kids don’t think it’s dangerous, that us adults are lying.”

Siete, in a workshop attended by more than 50 parents and their children at Aprende, said that 66 percent of teens think vape juices contain flavorings and only 19 percent realize that the majority of them contain nicotine.

Although Juul has repeatedly said they are targeting adult smokers, trying to convince them to vape instead, Siete and other critics disagree, citing the flavors.

“They are 100 percent targeting children,” Siete said.

Gordon, a psychologist, said young people are a difficult group to sway because they often think they are invincible.

“It’s a cool, hip product. They have definitely taken a page out of the advertising from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s” from the cigarette industry, Gordon said. “Nicotine is nicotine, no matter how it is delivered.”

She said studies have found that once teens become addicted to nicotine, they are more likely to start smoking tobacco cigarettes to satisfy their cravings.

Gordon is using a grant to update an online campaign aimed at discouraging teens from smoking tobacco cigarettes, which is now out of date because e-cigarettes have become such an epidemic.

She acknowledges e-cigarettes can serve as harm-reduction technique for long-time smokers, but not for non-smokers. She said nicotine itself has not been proven to cause cancer, but it has been implicated in contributing to
cardiovascular diseases.

Kevin Burns, CEO of Juul Labs, released a statement reiterating the company’s position that it does not target teens and that its market is adults trying to quit smoking tobacco cigarettes. At the same time, the company said it opposes any efforts by the FDA to ban flavors.

“JUUL Labs will work proactively with FDA in response to its request. We are committed to preventing underage use of our product, and we want to be part of the solution in keeping e-cigarettes out of the hands of young people.

“Our mission is to improve the lives of adult smokers by providing them with a true alternative to combustible cigarettes. Appropriate flavors play an important role in helping adult smokers switch,” the statement says. “By working together, we believe we can help adult smokers while preventing access to minors, and we will continue to engage with the FDA to fulfill our mission.”

Juul and four other e-cigarette companies have 60 days to submit a plan to the FDA for reversing the trend of teens buying and using their products.

The FDA in March announced long-term plans for forcing cigarette companies to reduce nicotine to non-addictive levels, with an overall goal of switching smokers to e-cigarettes.

But Dr. Scott Gottlieb, the FDA commissioner, said Wednesday that those plans must be adjusted to protect teens from becoming a generation of nicotine addicts through e-cigarettes.

“I believe certain flavors are one of the principal drivers of the youth appeal of these products,” Gottlieb said in an FDA press release. “While we remain committed to advancing policies that promote the potential of e-cigarettes to
help adult smokers move away from combustible cigarettes, that work can’t come at the expense of our kids.”