

Youth Speaks Out

The Time Is Now for Tobacco-Free Schools

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The history of tobacco use prevention and control has been traditionally dominated by the viewpoint that kids were part of the problem. Only in the '90s did it become clear that youths, when trained, can be effective advocates in targeting their peers, decision makers, and the public at large. In the context of tobacco use prevention and control, the construct of the teen changed from the one being taught to the facilitated educator. The current movement for Tobacco-Free Schools can be credited at least partially to the efforts of teens, in particular the response to Governor Hunt's Teen Tobacco Use Prevention Summit in 2000. At the Summit, the need to effect change honed in on schools, an environment where teens are familiar with the problems. The work since the Summit has resulted in letters to the editor, petitions, and events urging local school boards to adopt the 100% Tobacco-Free School policy. Adults provided essential support by helping the teens draft letters, get in contact with decision makers, prepare presentations, and "connect the dots" enabling them to present their message. Fueled by the energy of the next generation, with community resources and support contributing to the building momentum, Tobacco-Free Schools has become a campaign that is here to stay.

Youth

The Governor's Youth Summit provided the spark that was necessary for Tobacco-Free Schools to move forward in North Carolina. Part of what made the Governor's Summit so effective was its bringing together of school administrators, teachers, concerned citizens, and youths. It demonstrated the ability of students to speak articulately on an issue relevant to them on which they had not previously been

consulted. The Summit began with a teen panel discussion in which audience members posed questions to young people experienced in tobacco use prevention efforts. While many topics were addressed, the teens were particularly riled up by the idea of anyone, on school grounds, using a product that is harmful not only to the user but also to those in proximity. Schools are institutions that revolve around youth, and they are intended to provide an environment that fosters education and healthy life choices. Schools provide the social setting for much of teen life. And schools became the focal point that teens at the Summit chose to work on.

In an impromptu session, students who were willing to forego the social event and free time at the Summit got together and drafted a petition calling for 100% Tobacco-Free Schools across North Carolina. Copies were made and distributed the following day at the conference. Youth leaders encouraged their peers to take the petitions home and collect signatures. One month later, the signatures were pooled and the young people who were involved in drafting the petition were invited to the Governor's Mansion to present hundreds of signed copies to Governor Hunt. As a result of the advocacy work of these students, Governor Easley, former Governor Hunt, and State Superintendent Mike Ward have all sent letters supporting local school districts in their efforts to become 100% tobacco-free.

Since the Governor's Summit two years ago, the number of tobacco-free schools in North Carolina has tripled. Furthermore, numerous other schools have adopted stricter tobacco use policies without taking up the 100% tobacco-free policy. While the situation across the state has been improving, there are still 102 school districts that allow tobacco use on campus or at school-sponsored events. Carrying on the momentum, several groups from across the state are encouraging their school boards to adopt the policy.

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Tobacco-Free Makes Sense

Tobacco use prevention and control advocates have been able to make great strides in the Tobacco Free School effort because the policy just makes sense. Many proponents have rallied to the cause for a variety of reasons. Some find it inconsistent that drugs are prohibited on campus while tobacco products containing nicotine (a drug) are allowed. Others believe that teachers, if they intend to be role models, should promote healthy life styles and not engage in tobacco use on campus.

Schools are institutions centered around and for the benefit of youth. Like church and home, schools provide an environment for developing values and learning social behavior. Allowing teachers and administrators to use tobacco on campus while requiring students to take a health course where they are confronted with the hazardous effects of tobacco sends conflicting messages to teens. Moreover, teens are savvy enough to recognize both the inconsistency and the double standard. For students to truly believe school administrators care about healthy lifestyles, the administrators must extend their policy about tobacco to everyone who steps foot on campus.

The Need for Community Involvement

Students have rallied around the cause of Tobacco-Free Schools, but because of their lack of experience in influencing public policy, they need help. School policies reflect community values; hence, the school boards who decide policy can be greatly influenced by a community outcry, particularly from those in fields related to tobacco use. For example, the role of doctors and other healthcare professionals is usually seen to be at the “back end” of the tobacco addiction, tending to those who want to quit and those already afflicted by tobacco. But by drawing on their first-hand experience and sharing their stories, healthcare professionals can tremendously influence decision makers. They can testify to the results of this addiction, which, for the overwhelming majority of smokers, begins in schools before the age of 18. Health activist students need this help in making the case for 100% Tobacco-Free Schools.

The shared voices of youths, healthcare professionals, and other members of the community, combined with the momentum already present in the state, can move mountains. Three out of every four adults do not use tobacco products. Even more do not want children to do so. The time is right to make basic changes in schools to encourage a healthy lifestyle and to make North Carolina’s schools 100% Tobacco Free.