

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Vaping and Tobacco Controls

Melbourne – Monday 15 July 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O'Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

William Naughton-Gravette, Policy and Advocacy Manager,

Risith Jayasekara,

Grace Boehnke, and

Kevin Ch'ng, Victorian Student Representative Council; and

Andrew Dalgleish, President, Victorian Principals Association.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into Vaping and Tobacco Controls.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments you make outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I am going to welcome this afternoon William Naughton-Gravette, Policy and Advocacy Manager, and student representatives Risith – I apologise if I say this incorrectly – Jayasekara, Grace Boehnke and Kevin Ch'ng from the Victorian Student Representative Council. I am also going to welcome Andrew Dalgleish, President of the Victorian Principals Association. Thank you all so much for taking the time to speak to us today.

I am going to invite the Victorian Student Representative Council to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes. This is going to be followed by Mr Dalgleish, and then that will be followed by questions from the committee. Grace, I am going to hand over to you to start.

Grace BOEHNKE: Good afternoon, everyone. On behalf of everyone at VicSRC I would like to thank the committee for inviting us to share student perspectives on vaping at this forum today. I also want to acknowledge that today's meeting is taking place on unceded Wurundjeri land, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

My name is Grace. I am a year 10 student, and I am a member of VicSRC's student executive advisory committee. I am joined by Risith, a year 9 student, and Kevin, a year 10 student, who are also on VicSRC's exec committee, as well as William, who is VicSRC's policy and advocacy manager.

We want today to be an opportunity to share honest feedback and reflections, so we hope that you understand we will not be sharing the names of our schools, and we would appreciate not being asked about this.

VicSRC is the peak body for school-aged students in Victoria. We are a student-led organisation headed by our exec committee, which is made up of 15 secondary school students from across the state. We exist to advocate on behalf of students on the biggest issues according to them. We work closely with students to learn the problems they care about most and what they see as the most effective solutions to those problems.

Risith JAYASEKARA: Everything we do is focused on the idea of student voice. Student voice is not just listening to students; student voice also means that students have the opportunities to work collaboratively and as decision-makers alongside adults when it comes to their own education. Whether this is in the classroom, at school or in the government, student voice means that students have a role to play in shaping what their education looks like.

As for today's topic, we know that vaping is a growing concern throughout the community, especially when it comes to students and young people. Furthermore, there has been a strong focus on vaping in schools in the media and responses to this by both schools and the government. To be honest, vaping is not at the top of students' own priorities when it comes to their education. Most students are far more eager to talk about other

issues like their mental health and wellbeing, the barriers they face to feeling like school is accessible and inclusive and the need to support their post-school aspirations, whatever they are. Nonetheless, we recognise that there are a growing number of students who are vaping, and because of this we must find ways to collaborate with schools and with the government to address this problem.

Kevin CH'NG: In the lead-up to today we surveyed some students to get their views on vaping in the context of their education. I would like to share some key figures with you. Firstly, around 80 per cent of students agreed that schools have a role to play in addressing vaping, which is a big part of the reason that we are here today. Around 40 per cent of students believed that a lot of their peers were using vapes, and around 20 per cent said they saw it a lot on school grounds. Interestingly, while around 60 per cent of students said that they thought that their school was doing a lot to address vaping, students were split as to the effectiveness of what the schools were doing.

Grace BOEHNKE: We believe this demonstrates that school-based solutions do exist and are effective. But some other approaches are not working. If we want to get serious about actually stopping students from vaping, there needs to be strong feelings of trust and understanding between students and teachers. Punitive measures do not promote those feelings, and usually they have the opposite effect. We cannot expect students to meaningfully engage in school-based support for vaping when they do not feel like they can trust their teachers whilst reaching out for help. We have heard of situations where students' rights and their safety have been jeopardised by the measures of some teachers who take punitive actions against students who are suspected to vape. While we accept this is not endorsed or supported by the vast majority of schools, it presents serious issues for student safety when dealing with vaping at school. We think this represents a broader challenge, which is that teachers and school leaders are not equipped with the resources or training they need to help students who vape in ways that genuinely work. Furthermore, we think this demonstrates that student voice plays an absolutely essential role in learning about what the most effective school-based responses to vaping look like.

Risith JAYASEKARA: The more we listen to students about what they need, the more we will learn about what the proper solutions look like. We are pleased to have already started that work. Last year VicSRC worked with the Department of Education to help shape its updated policy and guidance around vaping. Through these consultations we learned from students that punitive measures in response to vaping do not work in addressing the root problem. Instead students had a strong preference towards policies which promoted health- and wellbeing-focused responses in schools and which provided students with pathways to access external support and get confidential advice if they felt they needed it. When the policy was released last year we were happy to see that these recommendations were reflected, but now we should be finding ways for students and school leaders to work together on finding solutions which match the unique needs of their own communities. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Dalgleish.

Andrew DALGLEISH: Thank you. Again, thank you very much to the committee for the invite to attend today. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands that we are meeting on, and I am also excited to be here with the students from the VicSRC and hear their considered views, which is incredibly important.

In my role I represent over a thousand primary school leaders, some in P-9 and P-12 colleges, in approximately 1260 schools across the state and over 380,000 primary school students. When I was invited to speak today I went back to my board members and sought input from them, because it certainly was not a significant enough issue that it was being raised consistently with me as a challenge in schools. However, on that feedback there were a number of issues that were starting to come through and there was some consistency in what was being seen in primary schools in rural, regional and metropolitan. Certainly the view of the Victorian Principals Association is that this is fundamentally a health issue which all sectors of the community have a responsibility to address and certainly that schools have a significant role to play in the health education of all of our young people, and that commences early in their school journey.

The feedback from across my membership tended to come through that the issue is not so much of children regularly bringing vapes to school but either finding them in school grounds after the weekend or overnight, maybe accessing them through either through elder siblings or friends and occasionally bringing them from

parents as well. That then was targeted by schools in how we continue to support and educate in a way that develops greater understanding and not necessarily in a punitive manner in the primary school sector. The feedback again has been that it seems to be declining, which is positive in comparison to last year. Again, schools are very comfortable in working with the Department of Education and with the responses that they have in place, whether that be policy, whether that be program support, communication to teachers to be able to educate or communication to parents around health and how they can support, and then making sure that those structures are in place for the education approach to this issue.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We will go straight to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thanks, Chair. Grace, how much does a vape cost?

Grace BOEHNKE: From what I know, sometimes they are between \$35 and \$50.

Bev McARTHUR: Where do students get the money from to buy such a product?

Grace BOEHNKE: I think either from their jobs or if they get pocket money.

Bev McARTHUR: Mr Dalglish, did you say primary school students are using vapes?

Andrew DALGLEISH: I have some evidence that some are – not a lot – but the evidence that I have received back from my members is that it has been either through siblings or they have found them or taken them from home.

Bev McARTHUR: So they are present in their home environment, you think?

Andrew DALGLEISH: For some, yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Do schools have a policy that vapes should not be allowed on school premises?

Andrew DALGLEISH: There is a department policy around no smoking of e-cigarettes or tobacco being allowed within 4 metres of a school boundary and similar if there are activities off school sites as well. So very clearly signs are displayed in primary schools, and schools will make sure if there are events outside that people understand clearly that that is not okay. Now, that is not just for students; that is for visitors and/or parents that are at events.

Bev McARTHUR: So if you find a student that is vaping or smoking, do you contact the parents?

Andrew DALGLEISH: Generally, yes. The first contact is to the parents to have a conversation with them, make sure that they are aware and offer support and assistance.

Bev McARTHUR: And what do they say?

Andrew DALGLEISH: It can range. Some parents are amazed or flabbergasted. Others I have had evidence of ‘Well, so be it’, depending on the parents – not necessarily the response we would like to hear, but again coming from ‘How do we support and make sure that your child is safe and healthy?’

Bev McARTHUR: So how do you prevent these products coming onto your premises?

Andrew DALGLEISH: As far as preventing, there is no scanning of bags or anything like that. It is really that if they are found then it is dealt with. I certainly know, from some principals, they say they will scan the grounds of a morning, especially after weekends – people come onto school sites after hours to do what they will do, whether it be playing, using the grounds appropriately or inappropriately – and that is to make sure that the grounds are safe.

Bev McARTHUR: So what do you think should happen to students who smoke or vape on school grounds?

Andrew DALGLEISH: Ultimately, as I said earlier, this is a health issue fundamentally, and the role of schools – and I am talking particularly of primary schools – is around that preventative education certainly making sure that people understand that it is inappropriate, that it is a health issue and that, again, they will be confiscated and there will be work with the parents. As far as punitive responses, we certainly do not know if

that is going to have the desired outcome, but again it is working as part of a broader community approach to deal with that education.

Bev McARTHUR: So rules and regulations these days on school grounds are not important?

Andrew DALGLEISH: Rules and regulations are important, but it is also how we educate students around why they are in place and then what actions can be taken. We talk and we hear today around attendance rates in young people – on one hand we are saying we need students to be at school and be attending, yet if we start to look at punitive responses, then are we sending a totally different message to those young people?

Bev McARTHUR: Risith, why do you think young people want to vape or smoke?

Risith JAYASEKARA: It is definitely a mix of reasons why people may take to smoking or vaping. I believe for the secondary sector it would be either peer pressure, because they see their friends are vaping and it is seen as a cool thing, so that may cause students to pick up vaping, or it could also be used as an escape method to escape from the stress of daily school life.

Bev McARTHUR: Kevin, what is your view? Why do young people want to smoke or vape?

Kevin CH'NG: I agree with Risith that a lot of it is peer pressure and mental health, but it is also, like, every student is different and we believe that they should be treated as such and that the response to each student should be individualised.

Bev McARTHUR: Right.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mrs McArthur. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, all, very much for joining us today. I really appreciated your presentations as well. One thing I found interesting is I think you, Mr Ch'ng, said there was a very wide awareness amongst students of measures being put in place by schools to address vaping as an issue and that students were split on how effective they were. Ms Boehnke, I think you said – that was correct, the pronunciation; good – that though it was rare you were aware of some punitive measures which had an adverse effect on student safety. Could you please elaborate for us what sort of punitive measures you were talking about and what sort of impacts they had?

Grace BOEHNKE: I am going to pass to William.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: Mr Galea, I might intervene here, just in everyone's best interests. We as an organisation have encountered a few isolated incidents of more extreme punitive measures taken against students, things like making physical contact against them to ascertain whether they had a vape on their person; asking students to lift up their clothing, their shirts, to inspect their waistbands to see if vapes were hiding in their pants; and things like that. Firstly, let me say that we have been abundantly satisfied with the response from the department when we have raised those concerns; and secondly, they are not widespread. But in those circumstances, what we have heard from students is that they are incredibly distressing and that they certainly have absolutely no positive impact by way of reducing their urge to vape.

Michael GALEA: Yes. And on the other side of that: when you have seen positive measures, what has that looked like? What has been the best case that you have seen and any results or impacts that you have seen from that, either Mr Naughton-Gravette or students?

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would say it is the better access for students who are facing the issue with vaping, having the access to trained mental health support staff or even just a teacher that they can speak to about their issue or their addiction and a channel for them to receive support based on the issue they are facing.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Is there anything more to add to that?

Kevin CH'NG: Yes. I think there needs to be a wellbeing-focused approach focused on how their mental health is and making sure that students have this trust and understanding with the teachers.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, and it is interesting that you said ‘mental health’. I was actually going to ask next – I think you, Mr Jayasekara, said in the introductory remarks about mental health that you believe that is the more important priority for students that you are facing. I suppose we are here to talk about vaping and tobacco today. To your mind, is there much of an overlap or any correlation between students experiencing mental health issues and incidence of vaping?

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would say yes. There especially is an overlap between students who are facing a mental health issue and students who do take on vaping. When it comes to schools’ efforts in combating this issue, I feel especially the teacher shortage does seem to have a large impact on this. It was highlighted in VicSRC’s 2023 congress report that schools do not have enough trained mental health support staff available, which would mean students do not have an adequate support system available at their school for them to voice their concerns.

Michael GALEA: Interesting to know. Thank you. Can I ask, again as a group: what sort of, if any, marketing are you seeing around vapes? Are you seeing anything on social media? Are you seeing perhaps at the corner shop there are some dodgy-looking products being sold? Or are there any other things that you are particularly seeing beyond just word of mouth with regard to vaping?

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would like to say that, yes, vapes do seem to be marketed in a way that may be enticing towards a younger audience, especially with the exotic flavours that I have seen – different fruits and sweet flavours. I would say those definitely entice young people and students to pick up vaping when combined with peer pressure and the possibility of getting off the stress.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. We actually heard from some representatives of the tobacco industry this morning, and we talked about these sorts of things with flavours and other colourful gimmicks that often you will see on vapes. Would it be fair to say that seeing things like watermelon crush or whatever it might be called makes it appear that vapes are a lot more harmless than they actually are to students?

Risith JAYASEKARA: Yes, it especially would be, because vapes are not marketed in any way similar to cigarettes. If a student was introduced to vaping, they would have no obvious idea that this is also a very dangerous path, similar to cigarettes.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you. Ms Boehnke, do you want to add something to that?

Grace BOEHNKE: Yes. With your other question about seeing other types of marketing towards vapes, I would say personally I have not really seen anything marketing vapes. I think it is more just word of mouth and the idea of teenagers and young people experimenting, and part of that is experimenting with nicotine and vaping, which is becoming a lot more prevalent in a lot of young people’s lives. Sorry, what was the question that you just asked then?

Michael GALEA: In terms of the social acceptance and in terms of it being branded as something that is quite benign.

Grace BOEHNKE: My experience with people that I know is that everyone knows that vaping is bad. I think that having the flavours and the names more represents fun and the idea of more experimentation and things like that, rather than distracting from all the things that are not very good for your health with vaping.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. In one of our very first hearings for this inquiry we were actually up in the north of the state, and we had some student leaders from a big high school up there come and tell us and share their experiences. One of the most startling things that we heard from that particular hearing was that they said in their experience it was actually quite uncool to vape by the time you are in senior high school years because it was seen as something that younger high school kids or even older primary school kids do, which was quite shocking to us. But is that a fair assessment from your experiences in your schools as well?

Grace BOEHNKE: Yes. I would definitely say the social divide when you get in the older years of school is a lot more. You have got the people that do vape because they are addicted – no-one is doing it anymore because they are experimenting and they have not done it before, it is because they are addicted to nicotine – whereas in the younger years, in years 7, 8 and 9, it is more about experimentation and trying it for the first time and then becoming addicted when you are in your senior years of high school.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: If I may quickly on this point – also, this was a very interesting point that came up in our consultations with the Department of Education last year in developing their policies. There was some discussion as to the cool factor associated with vaping, and we were very interested to see a really wide variety of responses from students. Some students in some schools said that, yes, that was a huge motivating factor and there was a lot of peer pressure, and other students said, ‘Actually, it’s pretty universally considered to be uncool,’ or that that does not exist. I think that that all in all really reiterates the need and the value for us to be speaking directly with students about these issues, especially when it comes to developing further policies, especially legislation, because there is not going to be a one-size-fits-all approach here in terms of what an appropriate response looks like. Each community is going to be different, and we need to make sure that we do that work.

Michael GALEA: Can I ask: I know you are all in relatively senior years of high school now, but when you were in primary school, was this an issue that you were aware of? Were any of your peers vaping that you knew of?

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would say vaping really became prevalent in around year 7, when I did see a lot of my class vaping. By then they seemed to be really comfortable with the vapes, so I would assume they probably did begin some time in late primary school, around year 6.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. If I can ask, based on that as well, Mr Dalgleish, in a separate inquiry – an education inquiry – a primary school teacher from northern Victoria told us that in her school, or the schools that she teaches at, vaping is quite common from about grade 4 and upwards, that it is prevalent but not very common from grade 2 and upwards and that it is not very common below that. Is that consistent with what you have seen, or is there much regional –

Andrew DALGLEISH: That is consistent with the information that I have had back. It is predominantly the seniors but starting around that grade 4, around that experimentation and what they may be seeing older children doing and even their parents.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Are you aware of any differences or trends between metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victorian primary schools?

Andrew DALGLEISH: No, I did not go quite to that level around seeking information.

Michael GALEA: Interesting. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Thanks for coming in. I would like to go to this point, Grace, that you just brought up earlier around the older high school cohort. You described that there are people who would say they are addicted to vapes and vape products. In the incoming legislation from the Commonwealth that is coming into place for adults, they will be able to buy a vaping product at a pharmacy, whereas people under age are going to require a GP prescription for a product like that. Given that the people you are describing would say they are addicted to these products, if they are unable to access a GP-prescribed product to fulfil that addiction that they have, do you think we currently have adequate support services for young people who might be experiencing withdrawals from these products who are maybe needing help with cessation? Do you think supports are currently adequate?

Grace BOEHNKE: If I am going to be honest, I think that from what I know and from my experience vapes are very accessible to buy. If it is not possible for someone who is addicted to nicotine to purchase a vape without going to the GP and just going to the local corner store and getting one, I think that there are lots of other ways to be able to access one, whether that is through older people you know going and buying one from the chemist for you. And to your point about –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So is your concern perhaps that then, rather than taking a sort of support pathway to move out of the dependency, people will instead turn to other avenues to find a replacement product, even if it is from the illegal market?

Grace BOEHNKE: Yes, big time. Sorry, what was your question about?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just for this cohort that you have described that would say they are addicted to the products, what supports do you think we need to see for those cohorts, particularly the older high school years, to ensure that we do not see a whole lot of young people experiencing withdrawals from these products while they are trying to go through their exam years at the end of their high schooling?

Grace BOEHNKE: I think that the school-based response to vaping, like Andrew said, needs to be more health-focused rather than behavioural issues, and I think having qualified professionals in schools to help with vaping and help those students with the addictions would be really helpful, rather than just going to the illegal market to buy a vape. Sorry, I do not think I phrased that very well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No, that was great. Does anyone want to add a few more comments?

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would like to add something onto Grace's point. Punitive measures that a lot of schools currently employ erode the trust between the students and the teachers, and especially it would discourage students from speaking up about their issue with vaping and talking to a trusted adult because they could fear getting a punitive action made against them. A lot of the teachers are not equipped with the proper skill set to address vaping issues, and they are not properly trained in what to do in a situation where a student approaches them with an issue with vaping.

Kevin CH'NG: I think also we need to make sure that students have access to information that they have external support services and other avenues that they can go down, including making complaints, so that they feel more comfortable and can seek this help.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Thank you. In what ways do we think that media literacy can be improved for young people to help them recognise, if they are seeing advertising that is trying to sell a vaping product, what that is and avoid the influence of those vaping ads?

Grace BOEHNKE: Is there any way that you could rephrase what 'media literacy' is?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, sorry, that is my bad. Basically, we heard from the cigarette companies earlier today. They were saying they are not intending for their ads to be seen by people under age, but yet there are individuals here who say that they have seen them; it sounds like there are young people who are seeing these ads. So, I suppose, in what ways can we help create education programs to recognise that that is an ad – 'It's trying to sell me a product here that the company themselves are saying is not intended for me'? What pathway should we be setting up to recognise what that is and to avoid being persuaded by that kind of material?

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: I might jump in here. I might say that I am not necessarily convinced that the solution is increased media literacy among young people. I think that the vast majority of young people are incredibly media literate. I think that the solution probably is in tighter rules and greater enforcement when it comes to the advertising of these products, because I think, as we said before, if we are going to embark on a project to increase media literacy among young people, we need to find a way to make sure that we are reaching all of the young people that we need to be reaching, and that is an incredibly complex endeavour. It is a virtuous one, absolutely, and I agree that it would be valuable. But I think that we ought to start with taking firmer control as to how these tobacco companies, for example, can reach young people.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Thank you. The vaping and smoking education programs – is there a view here that we should be co-designing those with young people, and what might that look like?

Grace BOEHNKE: I think it is absolutely essential to co-design education around vaping and the harm that it causes with young people and with students, because ultimately, if it is not engaging, then students are not going to learn that much and are not going to be able to take it away into their daily lives. I think it needs to be done so that it is with an inclusive pool of students and not just the same three or four students. That is a tricky task, but not every student is the same, each student community is not the same, and it needs to be a diverse range of students.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure. Do you have some examples of co-design processes that maybe you have been a part of that might be a good example to draw from in relation to these sorts of programs? You can talk about VicSRC, which you are involved with, if you want.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: I would be happy to. We are running a number of really wonderful programs engaging directly with the Victorian government across the board. Whether it is senior secondary reform – we have our student advisory panel there that are doing excellent co-design work in terms of, funnily enough, the media and communications elements of how we educate young people about what their options are in senior secondary. In the mental health space we are working very closely with the department to figure out, again in the media and the communication space, how we can increase awareness among students of the options that they have available to them and the pathways of support that they have access to, because resoundingly the feedback we get from students is that regardless of the quality or the quantity of support available to them, in many circumstances the awareness is really low. So we have established another group of students there working, again, directly with the department. These are really great examples of how we can bring together students and policymakers to make sure that students have that opportunity to co-design and collaborate on education policy.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Great. Thank you. Thanks for coming in. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Puglielli. Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for coming today. I am more interested in the education part – the awareness that you spoke about. In terms of the education part, you mentioned before you participated in the co-design with young people. So should vaping and smoking education programs be co-designed with young people?

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would say yes, especially because it is definitely hard for a bunch of adults to be able to effectively communicate with essentially young people. It is definitely vital that young people, who will be on the receiving end of those programs, are part of the co-design process and have a say in how these initiatives are – sorry, I lost my –

Meng Heang TAK: That is okay. That is all right.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: The short answer is yes.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

Andrew DALGLEISH: If I may, Mr Tak, I think it is really important when we are working with our young people around co-design that the language used and developed is very specific and that we are not talking about shame and embarrassment for those who may be using these products or are addicted, because more than anything that will push it underground, and people, particularly young people, will disengage even more.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you very much. I think you have already answered my second question, but I will perhaps go to Kevin, because you said that you involved a survey at your school and 80 per cent came back wanting the school to get involved in terms of understanding more about vaping and smoking. With that co-designed resource, what are the outcomes that you can see?

Kevin CH'NG: Sorry, could you rephrase that?

Meng Heang TAK: The positive outcomes from that survey.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: Allow me to clarify, because we put out a call in advance of this appearance to students to complete a survey on their attitudes and perceptions about vaping. So I believe you are referring to this figure: 80 per cent of students –

Meng Heang TAK: That is right.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: who agreed that schools have a role to play when it comes to addressing the issue of vaping. That is actually across the board from a number of both public and private schools, and I think it is reflective of a really strong appetite among students for their schools to play that role, you know, to provide that environment of support when and if a student feels that they need it to engage with ceasing vaping when they make that decision.

Meng Heang TAK: Okay. My last question, though, is in terms of as parents. I am very lucky that I am part of this inquiry; before that I knew very little about vaping at school and all of that. How can parental involvement in vaping prevention be increased? Or should parents get involved at all?

Andrew DALGLEISH: I think when we are talking co-design, certainly having students, families and educators working together gives that joint ownership and therefore greater opportunity or chance for success.

Meng Heang TAK: Sorry, more in terms of prevention, should parents or how can parents get involved more?

Andrew DALGLEISH: It is a good question, especially when parents have very, very busy lives themselves.

Meng Heang TAK: Yes, that is right.

Andrew DALGLEISH: Whenever we are talking, though, about health issues, it is about engaging as much with the parents as it is with the young people. It is educating at the same time around the dangers of these products to ensure that they have got the knowledge as well that they can share with their children and have a consistent message.

Meng Heang TAK: Yes. All right. Do parents view vaping as a significant issue?

Andrew DALGLEISH: That is probably not in the remit of the questions that I have asked my members, but talking as a parent and a grandparent, I will say yes. And that is a personal view.

Meng Heang TAK: Do you –

Grace BOEHNKE: Well, VicSRC is the student representative council, so we are not too sure what parents' views are. But I know it is definitely a concern for my parents.

Risith JAYASEKARA: Yes, I would like to echo that statement again. If I were to have an addiction to vaping, I know my mum would be quite horrified.

Mathew HILAKARI: You are putting that on the record here.

Risith JAYASEKARA: Yes. Going back to another point, I would say that students are much more likely to listen to one of their own peers, so it is very vital that we have a co-designed process in place or engagement with students about issues with vaping.

Meng Heang TAK: All right. I guess that is all of my questions. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Tak. Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much for appearing this afternoon. It is really appreciated. And this is part of co-design, of course, having you here. I would love you to just take on notice, as a starting point, the survey results that you received and would love for those to be shared with the committee if that is okay. And I am just wondering: what was the number of people that responded to the survey – because that is always the first question that we want to know about a survey?

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: Absolutely, yes. I will tell you that that was a preliminary survey. Our group of student executives – that would be 15. But I think it is reflective of the fact, though, as we heard from Grace, one of our executives, in our opening remarks, that vaping is not at the top of students' lists when it comes to priorities.

Mathew HILAKARI: No, I took that as a starting point.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: Yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is at the top of list for this committee's work today.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: Indeed. If we put a survey out there, I am not sure how many responses we would get, interestingly.

Mathew HILAKARI: Do you have any intention to do a wider survey? Not to put you on the spot in this moment, but I am.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: We do not have an intention to do so.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay. If you could share the results of the survey, that would be brilliant.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: Yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much for participating and adding to that, that richness. I just want to talk a little bit about accessibility to start with, so I am going to be asking about your own experiences – but obviously do not talk about your school and all the rest – within walking distances of your own schools. You are a school principal at the moment?

Andrew DALGLEISH: Not at the moment, no.

Mathew HILAKARI: Not at the moment – so maybe just talk about a previous school that you were at as well. What is the physical accessibility of places where you can buy vapes within the distance of your existing school or your previous school?

Grace BOEHNKE: My school is in the middle of farmland, so it might be a bit tricky to walk somewhere from my school to buy a vape.

Mathew HILAKARI: Yes. You would say very low, but in terms of your accessibility getting to school, whether that is in town or nearby, there is a high level of accessibility?

Grace BOEHNKE: Within the communities around my school, I would say, yes, it is pretty accessible.

Mathew HILAKARI: And for young people, so people who are clearly under 18?

Grace BOEHNKE: Yes, I would say it is still quite accessible.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great.

Risith JAYASEKARA: I have been to a few schools through my secondary education so far. I would say for the majority of those schools access to vaping and vape devices has been quite easy. I would say the nearest town usually does have a smoke shop or a vape shop or a chemist somewhere where students can easily access vaping products.

Andrew DALGLEISH: Certainly, just my observations, just the accessibility of smoke shops and so on – in regional communities and metro, yes, but not so much in some of our small rural communities. But certainly, again listening here, it is probably more accessible than I even thought.

Kevin CH'NG: I would echo everything. It is pretty accessible, and a lot of students –

Mathew HILAKARI: You could, off the top of your head, describe a store in your community where you could go and get a vape anytime, I would imagine.

Kevin CH'NG: Probably.

Mathew HILAKARI: You know of one in your head?

Kevin CH'NG: Probably.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great. I suspect that is the case in almost every community. Beyond bricks and mortar, are you aware of people receiving vapes by any other methods, so beyond walking into a store? Have you heard of or do you know of any other ways that people are accessing vapes?

Grace BOEHNKE: I have heard of students importing vapes and then selling them, but I do not know if you can do that anymore. I do not know. That was a few years ago.

Mathew HILAKARI: A few years ago, yes.

Kevin CH'NG: I think just getting it from friends.

Mathew HILAKARI: From friends, yes.

Risith JAYASEKARA: I have definitely seen a similar thing to what Grace said – that students are importing or buying them online and selling them at school.

Mathew HILAKARI: We did hear from students up in the north of the state previously, and they did talk about a bit of a curve of people starting off vaping, hitting a bit of a peak and then going down as it was considered uncool. What do you think has led to that being the case? What presents it as being uncool at a certain point in time?

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would say again, as Grace mentioned in a previous point, it is definitely the fact that teenagers are experimenting with nicotine and different pathways to manage stress or to be seen as cool. I would say a lot of teenagers from my experience are really focused on their social standing during those years, during middle secondary, early secondary, but towards senior secondary the idea of social standing is really reduced and it is really just, 'I want to get through VCE.' So I would say that is what really drives vaping becoming uncool.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask you a follow-up. I thought that was a really good question and answer. Why do students think that vaping manages stress?

Risith JAYASEKARA: I feel like it is the social aspect especially, because vaping is seen as a social activity – from my experience. It is definitely something from peer pressure, but I believe it is also, with the nicotine rush, that it would make students feel that it takes the edge off the stress, really, that students feel from assessments and really in the early- to mid-secondary age range.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: Might I add, just very quickly – I am reflecting on some things I heard from Grace in one of our conversations last week where she told me a little bit about her observations in terms of the impacts that an addiction to nicotine has on students in the classroom in terms of difficulty focusing and the fidgeting and all of that. I think that part of this drop-off is probably students who are brought in by the allure initially but then all of a sudden are exposed to dealing with these challenges of addiction further on, and then all of a sudden that allure is gone. So I think that what Grace said to me really reiterates the fact that this fundamentally is a health issue and it is a very serious one, where young people are dealing with addiction in the classroom and withdrawal as well, and it further reiterates the importance of taking that health-focused response within school settings.

Mathew HILAKARI: Just in terms of a health-focused response, have you had anyone that you know undertake some services like involvement in the Quit services or the Quitline or those sorts of bodies? Do you know if there is accessibility to the information about those services? Have you ever seen them before?

Grace BOEHNKE: No, none. No-one I know has taken part in those services, and my friends try and quit. I do not think they would have ever crossed their minds.

Mathew HILAKARI: Do you find that that information is freely available to you and your friends?

Grace BOEHNKE: From my experience I do not think that it is a very common idea and something that is thought of to be even an option for young people. I am not too sure. It has never really been talked about.

Mathew HILAKARI: And within your own schools as well?

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would like to say that a lot of students would see Quitline and those other services as something more aimed toward cigarette smokers and the older population rather than the younger students who are addicted to vaping. I feel like a lot of the students who do engage with vaping are not aware of any support services available to their specific age range or that they would be able to relate to.

Grace BOEHNKE: And I just wanted to add, the advertisements that I have seen on Snapchat and TikTok by the government to help, telling young people to quit vaping, none of them are about getting support. It is just like, 'If you have to do it in the bathroom stalls, why are you still doing it?' It is not about reaching out for help, it is more just about 'Quit'.

Mathew HILAKARI: Yes.

Kevin CH'NG: From my experience, I think with these support services it is both that students have a stigma that they just do not want to go to that and they do not think it would be effective for them or that they just do not know about it.

Mathew HILAKARI: So there is maybe a lack of knowledge, awareness and hitting the right mark in terms of speaking to young people. Well, they are some good co-design opportunities as well. In terms of principals – and I know there are a huge amount of other pressures, of time and importance about the communications that you use, because you have got to communicate a whole bunch of information to parents and students – how do vaping and quitting vaping or support around vaping register in your view on that list of priorities? Is it way down the bottom or is it somewhere in the middle or –

Andrew DALGLEISH: Certainly in primary schools it is not seen as a major, major issue. It is more a peripheral one, and it is dealt with on probably an ad hoc basis when it comes to dealing with perhaps those children who are using it. I mean, it is more about prevention through the education processes that start right at early childhood. So it is not one that I am seeing as a high-level one in the primary sector.

Mathew HILAKARI: And do you think the government is getting it right in terms of the supports and information that is available to principals?

Andrew DALGLEISH: I think there are quite a large range of supports available, certainly through the department's policy portals and information, which layers through and targets, say, the primary school sector, but then it goes through into Quitline, into health, into translated information and so on. So it is quite in-depth, what is there. Again, I cannot comment specifically on secondaries, but primaries definitely look more at that education process and starting earlier on around tobacco and then vaping as well.

Mathew HILAKARI: You might want to ask.

The CHAIR: I am just interested to know – I know that you just said that primary school is really about prevention and getting them before it starts – at what age for a student you would start the conversation in primary school around what is healthy to put in your body and what is not for this.

Andrew DALGLEISH: It starts pretty much at foundation or prep year. If you are using the life education van and so on, it is talking about healthy food but then anything else that may be unhealthy going in. Those programs will deal with painkilling drugs such as paracetamol and cough medicines and so on and then will start heading more traditionally into tobacco and things like that. So it does start at quite an early age.

Bev McARTHUR: Sorry, Chair. What age is early?

Andrew DALGLEISH: Five and six, at commencement of primary school.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is really something, isn't it? In your own schools or schools that you know of, have you been aware of any smoking or vaping detectors? Are they widely used within toilets and toilet blocks? I have heard of these being used. Is that something that is widely used across schools?

Grace BOEHNKE: My school just recently got some vape detectors, and it has been really interesting to see how the bathrooms have changed and how people's vaping has changed within the school, because it was not all of the bathrooms that got them, it was one or two. I think it is a really great way to deter people from vaping at school and vaping in the bathrooms, but it does not solve the issue and stop vaping; it just stops people from doing it in that specific space.

Mathew HILAKARI: So people are vaping now, I do not know, behind the school shed or – yes, okay.

Grace BOEHNKE: Yes. But I do think that it has been really effective at making it so that the bathroom is a place to go to the bathroom.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great.

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would say one of the schools I attended did not install vaping detectors. I was speaking with one of the students there recently. They still have not installed detectors. One thing they do, though – and I have seen it done a lot of Victorian schools – is they lock the bathrooms during the day and they are only open during lunchtime and recess. That is a terrible measure, because that means students do not have free access to bathrooms or any of those facilities purely because of the few students who are vaping. I feel like that is teetering on a medical issue as well, because students who do have that requirement to have access to a bathroom are being denied that.

Mathew HILAKARI: Is that an experience that you have heard of in another schools, bathrooms being locked?

Grace BOEHNKE: Lots of schools – lots and lots of schools.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: We certainly have heard that, as well as other measures, like deploying teachers out to patrol bathroom areas, which again we heard was a bit of an oppressive measure as well that can compromise that feeling of safety there. I think Grace and Risith are completely right: a vaping detector, if it keeps a bathroom open, is something, but it does nothing to stop a student ultimately vaping. If they want to vape, they will vape.

Mathew HILAKARI: Do you have a view on what is leading to potentially bathrooms being locked? Is that something that is being discussed?

Andrew DALGLEISH: Certainly not in the primary school sector. Again, as I mentioned earlier, we do not tend to have kids sneaking off to the bathrooms to vape. It is more done as the experimentation side of things, so no, not particularly.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask a question: how do you get rid of your vapes? What do you do with them when you are finished?

Grace BOEHNKE: A lot of people just keep them in a box in their room, but I think just chucking them out in public places is mainly the thing. That is why hearing that they are at primary schools on the grounds makes a lot of sense.

The CHAIR: Do you think that students are aware of the environmental impacts with the lithium batteries inside the vape – basically, if they are vaping and they continue to vape, the amount of lithium batteries that are being made and sold illegally and how we dispose of them and how dangerous that is?

Grace BOEHNKE: I did not know that.

The CHAIR: Do you think that would have an impact particularly on young people, who are very much aware around the environment and climate change, the impact that lithium batteries have, say, at the local tip and things like that?

Grace BOEHNKE: I am not too sure. I think you would have to ask a wide range of students and do a bit of student voice.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: I think it would be an effective measure and I think it would work, but it would be very important that it went along with the broader work to ensure a safe environment in a school, whereby if we are going to, let us say, effectively educate students as to the environmental impacts of disposable vapes and provide them with some means to dispose of them properly, a student will not make use of them if they feel that there is any risk of them being found out, being caught, whatever. They need to have that sense of trust that they can do that and they can make use of those facilities, especially on a school ground,

because otherwise they will just chuck it in the bin or whatever because they do not want to be seen; they do not want to be caught.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: The other question I have is: is there any sort of education awareness or even concern? We talk about vaping being seen as cool and trying these things out, and I remember many years ago now – though it does not seem like it – when I was at school and all of the things that we tried.

Bev McARTHUR: It was just yesterday, Chair.

The CHAIR: I know it looks like it was just yesterday.

Mathew HILAKARI: We are about to get some insight into the Chair of the committee now. Be prepared!

The CHAIR: There is education awareness obviously about nicotine being addictive, the types of terrible diseases and eventually potentially death it can lead to and the type of death. What about, because they are illegal – they are coming in illegally into the country – them potentially having substances other than nicotine in them that are poisonous? Because it is not regulated, it is not legal and you do not know what is inside them. We did hear evidence from a school where a poor young student – and I am sure he has never done it again – I think in primary school tried a vape for the first time, completely wiggled out, went to hospital and was quite unwell. Is there that kind of concern? Do people realise that because it is not legal, the substances going into the vapes can be more than just nicotine? It is not like buying over-the-counter packets of cigarettes.

Kevin CH'NG: Just from my experience, if a student is driven to vaping, then generally they would not be concerned too much about that. But there definitely needs to be some more like education put out there – programs that do tell these students, 'Here are the negative impacts of vaping and what the impacts of buying illegal vapes can be.'

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: If I may too, I think it is important that we recognise the magnitude of the challenge that students face when they have an addiction specifically to nicotine that is derived from vapes, whereby the amount of nicotine in those devices might be hundreds of times that of a cigarette. So much is said about the enormous challenge that a person faces when they try to quit traditional smoking. I can only imagine how intense those feelings of addiction and withdrawal when you do not have it would be when you have only used vapes before. As Grace said before, from my perspective I am pretty confident that most students have a good understanding of the fact that there are all sorts of things in these vapes; I think they get that. But they are deeply, deeply addicted to nicotine by virtue of these devices. When they weigh it up, I just do not think it is enough of a motivator when they are in the midst of an addiction like that.

The CHAIR: What about prevention back at your end, Mr Dalglish?

Andrew DALGLEISH: It is almost part of that broader social challenge we have around illicit substances. People will still take them regardless of age, depending on circumstance, whatever they doing, and I am not sure necessarily that continually hammering away and educating around the dangers of these products is going to hit the mark. Again, we have heard these fine young people talking about when students get to that senior secondary college and they have gotten through that experimentation: 'No, this is where I want to be.' Again, listening to our young people, what does co-design mean when there is an ownership? I am not sure if trying to continually say 'We know there are some really dangerous things in there' is going to change the view of someone who thinks 'Well, I'm under peer pressure' or 'I'm just going to experiment and have a go'. Will it actually stop them from doing it?

Bev McARTHUR: What about if they saw ads that show there is rat poison and rat faeces in these illegal products? Would that hit the mark, Grace?

Grace BOEHNKE: I think the idea of seeing rat faeces in a vape sounds disgusting.

Bev McARTHUR: Would it put you off?

Grace BOEHNKE: Yes. But I also think in the moment you are not thinking about that if you are at a party and someone has just offered you a hit of a vape. You are not thinking, 'Lithium batteries, rat poison.' That is not where your head is going. So I do not know to be honest.

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would like to add that when you mentioned that a lot of the vapes are being imported illegally and are unregulated, I am aware of that because I have been doing some personal research into it, but I would say a lot of students are not aware of this. It is not widely known in the student community, nor is it spread, and students are definitely unaware of the dangers of the ingredients inside of these vaping devices.

Bev McARTHUR: What about if you had a poster in the toilet that showed you are ingesting rat poison? Would that help you?

Grace BOEHNKE: The posters I think within the bathrooms at the moment have got cartoons on them and they are just like, 'Vaping's bad.' They are not very effective.

Bev McARTHUR: We need to be more hard-hitting, do you think?

Grace BOEHNKE: I am not too sure, to be honest.

Mathew HILAKARI: Vaping versus traditional cigarettes – do you want to just talk about what you think the percentage breakdown of usage amongst people you know is? Does anyone use smoke cigarettes at all, and if not, why do you think that is the case?

Grace BOEHNKE: People that I know that are my age and smoking cigarettes are doing it to quit vaping.

Bev McARTHUR: They are smoking cigarettes to quit vaping?

Grace BOEHNKE: Yes.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: Much less nicotine.

The CHAIR: Illegal tobacco?

Grace BOEHNKE: Legal.

The CHAIR: Obviously, purchasing cigarettes is very, very expensive. How are they accessing the cigarettes?

Grace BOEHNKE: I am not too sure to be honest. I know for a lot of people and for my friends it is just that their parents smoke.

Bev McARTHUR: Their parents supply it?

Grace BOEHNKE: I think it is just stealing them – well, not stealing them, but just taking them.

The CHAIR: 'Sharing'.

Mathew HILAKARI: Risith and Kevin, I might ask you as well in terms of the percentages of tobacco and vaping.

Risith JAYASEKARA: I would say that I have never seen somebody in early to mid secondary age levels smoking cigarettes, because it is really seen as something uncool, like for older generations, which is ironic when people think that vaping is cool. I would say I have not seen anyone smoking traditional cigarettes. It is really all e-cigarettes and vaping devices.

Kevin CH'NG: It is pretty much all vapes. That would be my experience. It is just the cool factor and the social pressure to go vaping – I do not know, it is just not there for the cigarettes.

Mathew HILAKARI: Mr Dalglish, across schools are you getting reports that there is any cigarette smoking?

Andrew DALGLEISH: No, it is more the vaping: again, the bright colours – finding them on the ground – and the flavours.

Mathew HILAKARI: Yes. Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. I think that is it – do you have –

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, I do. I am just wondering if you know of any evidence, anecdotal or substantive, that might suggest if students are more likely to be vaping in a household where there are parents or others smoking or vaping.

William NAUGHTON-GRAVETTE: I am certainly not aware of any such evidence myself.

Andrew DALGLEISH: Anecdotally maybe, but not hard evidence.

The CHAIR: Okay. I think that is the end of questions from committee members today. Thank you so much for taking the time to just come and talk to us and share your experiences and share experiences from parents, principals and students. It is really valuable information, and you all spoke so well – very brave. The committee is going to follow up on any additional questions or questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is going to take a very short break before recommencing the hearing. I declare the hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.