

In tobacco state, students testify about youngsters' vaping

27 February 2019, by Adam Beam

Twelve-year-old Hannah Piedad first encountered vaping—an electronic form of smoking—at a New Year's party. It was the smell that got her attention.

"I was intrigued because it smelled just like maple syrup," she said.

Now the student at Johnson County Middle School in eastern Kentucky has testified before lawmakers in this tobacco state that [e-cigarettes](#) have become commonplace at her [school](#) despite a state law requiring a person to be at least 18 to buy them.

Piedad and her classmates told state lawmakers Wednesday that they regularly find their peers vaping in the bathroom, with many hiding the products in plain sight. They plug them into their laptops to fool teachers into thinking they just have a USB storage device or they carry them around in water bottles with secret compartments.

"Imagine a whole generation of us, but addicted to nicotine. That is what's happening all across Kentucky right now," warned Emily Farler, 13.

The students' testimony before the Kentucky Senate Health and Welfare Committee highlights a challenge for [tobacco companies](#), which have bet their future on e-cigarettes and other vaping products. But those products have drawn the scrutiny of federal regulators, who blame their flavored varieties for appealing to children and halting what had been a steady decline of youth smoking rates.

Altria, one of the world's largest tobacco companies, has purchased a nearly \$13 billion stake in Juul Labs, one of the leading makers of e-cigarettes. Recently, those companies have been trying to persuade state legislatures across the country to raise the tobacco age to 21 in an effort to address concerns by the Food and Drug Administration. Similar proposals have been filed in

Tennessee, Delaware and Arkansas. And last week, Virginia became the seventh state to raise the tobacco age to 21.

But lawmakers in Kentucky, one of the country's largest tobacco-producing states, rejected a similar effort on Monday. Republican state Sen. Stan Humphries, who is a tobacco farmer, declared just before that vote that "tobacco is still king."

But Wednesday's testimony from the [middle school students](#) appears to have revived efforts to raise the vaping age in Kentucky. The students urged passage of Senate bill 218, which would set up a way for students to anonymously report concerns about vaping at their public schools.

Following the student's testimony, Republican Sen. Steve Meredith said he would amend the bill to include a ban on people 21 and younger from purchasing e-cigarettes and other vapor products.

It would still allow 18-year-olds to purchase traditional cigarettes and chewing tobacco.

"If you can't get the whole pie I'll settle for half the pie. This is a good start," Meredith said.

All tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, are already illegal for anyone under 18 in Kentucky. But Meredith said 80 percent of [high school seniors](#) turn 18 before they graduate, offering a potential conduit for the products into [public schools](#). E-cigarettes contain nicotine, and a 2016 U.S. Surgeon General report concluded youth exposure to nicotine of any kind can cause addiction and harm brain development.

Juul Labs spokesman Ted Kwong declined to comment about Meredith's proposed amendment, which would affect Juul products but not traditional tobacco products.

Earlier in the week, Kwong said the company

supports raising the minimum purchase age for all [tobacco](#) products and is "committed to preventing youth access of JUUL products, and no [young person](#) or non-nicotine user should ever try JUUL."

It's unclear if Meredith's proposed amendment will have enough support to pass this year. But the middle school students were delighted their testimony inspired Meredith to try again.

"I think that's pretty cool," said 13-year-old Constance Martin. "Normally when you think of like a middle school kid you just think they are going to, like, go home and play video games. But no, we are here testifying in front of a committee. That's wild."

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