

Friday, 24 May 2024

Transcript: Joint press conference – AMA, Australian Education Union (AEU), Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA), Australian Parents Council

Topic: Federal government's vaping legislation

STEVE ROBSON, PRESIDENT, AMA: I'm joined here this morning by representatives from education, from school leaders, from teachers and from parents. We've joined together to speak with and write to Australia's parliamentarians to urge them to support the vaping reform legislation that's before the Parliament at the moment.

Vaping is quite possibly one of the greatest public health challenges that we're facing at the moment. It has enormous negative consequences for children, and we're seeing children around the country become dependent on vapes at extraordinary levels. After years and years of fruitful work in reducing rates of smoking, we're now seeing nicotine use through vapes go through the roof. We have a window of opportunity to help protect the next generation of Australians, and we urge all parliamentarians to join us and put aside considerations of funding from tobacco lobbies and business interests who seek to profit from vaping, and we're urging you to put the wellbeing of the next generation of Australian children first. We've been very alarmed to hear of sectors such as the National Party who are planning or talking about making money and profiting from vaping on children. This is a terrible approach. It sends a signal that somehow vaping is okay, and that vaping is a way we can make money. That is the absolute opposite of what we want to see. So we can't speak strongly enough about how harmful vaping is to young Australians, and we are here today as a group of health professionals and of teachers and of parents who want to see the next generation of young, vulnerable Australians protected from the harms of vaping.

I'm going to hand over to Correna Haythorpe, who's the President of the Australian Education Union.

CORRENA HAYTHORPE, PRESIDENT, AEU: I speak on behalf of principals, teachers and support staff across Australia. The issue of vaping is causing increased disruption in our schools with respect to teaching and learning, not only from its illicit use by students and on the school grounds or in bathroom facilities, but to the level of disengagement that students are having who are vaping in their classroom every day. For teachers who are experiencing escalating workloads and are dealing with very complex needs of students, the issue of vaping needs to be resolved by governments. Our teachers need to be backed by governments and by education departments because this is a societal issue that has filtered into the classroom. Our teachers need a systemic response, and that's why we are urging all parliamentarians to support the government's proposed reforms on vaping.

DAMIEN ELLWOOD, PRESIDENT, ACSSO: As a leading voice of families for over 2.3 million students in public education, ACSSO is deeply concerned by the uptake of vaping and the normalisation of vaping among our youth. In September, we undertook a survey about vaping — 97 per cent of respondents indicated concern about the health risks of vaping; 57 per cent of parents and carers indicated very high levels of concern about the children in their care, the teens in their care from vaping. Parents wanted a number of things: they wanted further research, they wanted an education campaign, and they wanted a public health campaign. Further, they wanted greater restrictions on the availability of vapes. Vapes are marketing products, packaging and new concealments very appealing to the youth. Vapes are readily available to people under the age of 18, and the current restrictions are not working. This is leading to a public health crisis for our youth, and something needs to be done.

On that basis, ACSSO is calling for two things: significant funding for research, for education and for a public health campaign. In particular, families need good information to have confident conversations with their youth. We're also urging all senators to pass the bill before Parliament to restrict the availability of vapes.

JENNIFER BRANCH-ALLEN, PRESIDENT, AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL: Well, here we are again. I thought cigarette smoking was bad enough, but here we are again with vaping impacting on our community, and more so on our children in our schools. Vaping is causing harm to our kids. We don't know the outcomes. We don't



know what's going to present us in the future with vaping. Our children are being used as guinea pigs — guinea pigs to test out what vaping might do to them in the future. It must stop. The Australian Parents Council wants action, and we call upon senators to listen and understand the dangers and stop it, and stop it now. This is a small window of opportunity that we have, and we want you to take it. We all want to make sure that our children have safe, positive, happy lives, and vaping is harming them. Vaping is damaging the wellbeing and health of our children and our society. Please, I ask you from this day to stop and think about the damage that it is causing and make sure that this legislation goes through so our children have a good, safe life.

SARAH ROSE, SPOKESPERSON, CSPA: Good morning. I am Sarah, and I'm standing here today as a mum of three teenagers and also as an executive member of Catholic School Parents Australia, which serves as the national body, a voice of families for over 768,000 children across the country. We're proud to be standing here today. We believe in providing a holistic education for all the children in our care. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that schools remain safe havens where students can learn and flourish without the threat of harmful substances. Our support of these legislative measures is rooted in our commitment to fostering safe and supportive learning environments. Schools should be places where parents can feel confident that their children are secure and their wellbeing is prioritised. By implementing these reforms, we're taking a vital step towards ensuring that and safeguarding the health and wellbeing of our students. The Senate will be meeting soon to debate the vaping reforms bill; CSPA wholeheartedly believe that through collective action and support, with strong legislation, we can protect our children and uphold the integrity of our education environments and ensure a brighter, healthier future for all.

QUESTION: You mentioned that the current set of restrictions aren't working. Provided that the state knows [indistinct] many states are [indistinct] to sell the stock of prescription [indistinct]. What is different about this legislation to state based legislation? [Indistinct]

STEVE ROBSON: We're seeing a normalisation of vaping, as though it is something that Australian kids should be allowed to do. As you absolutely correctly point out, the vaping legislation at the moment is not being enforced, so that is the key and critical reason that the new vaping reform must go through. We must keep all non-prescription e-cigarettes out of this country. We have an opportunity to do it, and we need to move to a model where e-cigarettes are used as they were intended, in a small group of people as a transitory thing to help with smoking cessation. There should be no other vape use in this country.

QUESTION: You mentioned this morning, Steve, that some politicians seem to be listening more to the tobacco lobby than parents and children. Who were you referring to there, and what do you make of the Greens and the Opposition [indistinct] in this bill so far?

STEVE ROBSON: I was shocked that the Nationals would support some sort of vaping excise as a money raising venture. Mr Littleproud does not get it. He doesn't understand the health risks of this, and we're really disappointed that this is a position that he and the National Party would consider taking. Even if you look at it economically, any money that's raised from an excise will be dwarfed by the health costs of dealing with the harms of vaping in the future. It's a total ridiculous way to look at it economically and it puts children at risk. So we're very disappointed with Mr Littleproud and the Nationals for floating this as an idea.

QUESTION: And the Greens?

STEVE ROBSON: We're speaking with the Greens at the moment, and we hope that the Greens will also understand why this is so important. We think that the Greens are a party who put the future of the next generation at the heart of their policy, and this clearly is something they should support if they really, truly do put the health and wellbeing of children and the next generation as a priority.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]

STEVE ROBSON: We're very, very concerned that money put in by business interests and big tobacco is tainting the debate in this. People need to put short term political funding aside, and they need to make sure that their primary consideration is the health and wellbeing of Australia's children.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]

STEVE ROBSON: We believe that there is a small and very limited role for e-cigarettes to be used for a small amount of time as part of a whole suite of medical interventions to help people stop tobacco smoking. The



idea that e-cigarettes have taken off and led to dependence of children around the country is an absolute appalling situation. We have an opportunity to deal with that and put e-cigarettes in the small and limited place they have as a transient way of helping people who have trouble giving up cigarettes in doing that.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]

STEVE ROBSON: So we've seen in a number of places around the world measures to look at the correct role of e-cigarettes. The problem is that as a new phenomenon, we're learning more and more about them all the time. And every single bit of information we get about e-cigarettes paints them in a worse and worse light. There is limited, if any, role for e-cigarettes in medical practice but we concede they may help a small group of people if they're under the supervision of a doctor and seen as part of a broad suite of measures to help people give up tobacco. But that should be their only role.

QUESTION: Can I ask a question about the Greens [indistinct]? My understanding is that the Greens don't accept tobacco donations. So what exactly are you suggesting there about their policy?

STEVE ROBSON: I wasn't referring to the Greens there. As I said, the Greens Party are a party that put the health, wellbeing of the next generation at their heart. So we're hoping whatever internal discussions the Greens are having, they focus on the health and wellbeing of the next generation.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]... You've said limited if any role for e-cigarettes to play. How big is the upside? It can't be that great when you're talking about running the health of the next generation... [inaudible]

STEVE ROBSON: We recognise the evidence at the moment is very, very limited. But if there is any evidence at all for e-cigarettes, it is probably in a small group of people as part of a broad suite of measures to help them stop smoking with a view to getting off e-cigarettes. The downside has been the total proliferation of nicotine containing recreational vapes around the country that have led to dependence of some very, very, very vulnerable people, including our children.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]... discussions with the Greens. [Inaudible]... what have they raised as points of resistance?... [inaudible]

STEVE ROBSON: I can't speak for the Greens, but I'm sure they'd be very welcome to take the questions about their own internal discussions.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]

STEVE ROBSON: With these new measures to deal with vaping and vaping harms to vulnerable Australians, it's critically important that we have an education campaign as well, so that we deal with the demand side of these things. So it's a two-pronged approach to make sure that people do not have access to harmful vapes unless it's under medical supervision, and to make sure we take the community with us. I have with me people who represent children in the education sector. I'd really like them to have a voice here.

DAMIEN ELLWOOD: So, families and carers, parents have identified a number of health risks associated with vaping. It includes heart and respiratory disease, addiction and causing mental health concerns. There is an understanding by youth that these things are good. They're cool. They're also somewhat healthy. And there really does need to be a measure to reduce the demand in concert with reducing the supply of vapes. They need to work together. There is a risk, I guess, that the vapes could go underground. We need to address that. So, research, education and public health campaign are really critical and substantial funding for that is needed. The current measures really aren't working. There needs to be more effort put in that way.

JENNIFER BRANCH-ALLEN: I just think it's important to say what is a child's life worth? Because already in Australia we have had the death of a young person die of nicotine poisoning through a vape. What about that family? What about what they're experiencing? They've lost a child. Now this could happen again. And this is what we want to stop.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]

STEVE ROBSON: So delegation of law enforcement to these is going to local health authorities. The police role is likely to be dealing with organised crime.

QUESTION: [Inaudible]



STEVE ROBSON: We know that the enforcement of the existing state and territory laws around supply of vapes and vaping products to Australians under the age of 18 are not being enforced properly. So one of the key measures in this is making sure vapes are not brought into the country, they're not manufactured in the country and they're not marketed to kids. These are absolutely critical strategies. As a group, we collectively support them 100 per cent.

QUESTION: [Inaudible question]

STEVE ROBSON: All of us strongly support Mr Butler, Mr Albanese and the laws that are before the Parliament because they tie up a lot of loose ends in the current legal environment across the states and territories, and they send a strong signal to the community that vaping is bad. It has very limited role. And we're finally seeing some legislation that is world leading and has the potential to head off a public health crisis and protect a whole generation of young Australians.

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