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Opinions

My school district is suing Juul. Here's why.

By Austin Beutner

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Austin Beutner is the superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

The Los Angeles Unified School District filed a lawsuit last October against Juul Labs Inc., the nation's largest manufacturer of electronic cigarette devices. We took this step to hold Juul accountable for its role in creating an epidemic that affects the health of our students — disrupting their learning and taking time and money away from our core mission of educating students.

Since we filed suit, [several other school districts](#) in California have joined us in this class action, as we're acting in the absence of leadership on this at the state and federal levels.

Students are becoming addicted to nicotine and other harmful substances and suffering serious health problems, losing days, weeks and months of school. The loss of instructional time also means a loss of state funding, which is based on student attendance. Fewer dollars means fewer teachers, nurses, counselors and librarians in our schools, and we are diverting funding away from classroom instruction and spending it instead on counseling and on programs to inform students of the dangers of vaping.

Vaping incidents are on the rise in our high schools, our middle schools and, sadly, in our elementary schools. How do we know this? Because our educators are reporting these incidents every day. We also have many students who see the problem for what it is and are telling us how it is affecting their schools.

Students tell us that they have seen their peers in serious need of help due to nicotine addiction. They have seen their peers missing school as a direct result of vaping, either through illness or expulsion. They have seen their previously upbeat friends become sullen and angry, withdrawing from sports, clubs and other activities they previously loved.

The vaping epidemic has reversed one of the great modern public-health success stories, with teen smoking rates [plummeting](#) from 28 percent in 2000 to about 8 percent in 2017. Since then, the use of e-cigarettes has soared among students. In Los Angeles County, [30 percent](#) of high school students report trying e-cigarettes and 10 percent say they are regular users.

In response to our lawsuit, Juul has consistently said it does not intend to attract underage users to its products, adding in [a recent statement](#) that it is working on “earning the trust of society” by combating underage use. But that doesn’t negate that previous marketing campaigns from the company, as the Food and Drug Administration [has laid out](#), have enticed vulnerable students, relying on youth-focused advertising and social media to promote nicotine-laced vaping devices that resembled computer flash drives and can be concealed in a pocket, a hoodie or even the strap of a backpack. Nor does it negate the fact that many students are now addicted to their products. The company now controls more than [70 percent](#) of the market. It so dominates the market that the practice of vaping is now often referred to as “juuling.”

Taxpayers should not have to pay the cost of fighting the vaping epidemic in our schools. By marketing and selling these products to young people, Juul has sought to make money at the expense of public education and the communities we serve.

The state of California and the Trump administration need to do more. A [partial ban](#) on flavored tobacco products is not enough. We need to stop the sale of all flavored tobacco products, which are clearly targeted at children. Anything less diminishes the health and safety of our students. There also needs to be better enforcement to hold stores and Internet sellers accountable. State and local agencies must develop effective plans to halt the illegal sale of vaping products to underage users.

In addition to a ban on flavored tobacco products, tighter regulation of nicotine content would make a difference. It is noteworthy that European countries [restrict nicotine levels](#) in vaping liquids, making them significantly less potent than those sold in the United States.

Los Angeles Unified is taking steps to ensure those responsible will pay the price to repair the harm done to our students, our schools and the communities we serve. Others need to join us in this fight, and quickly. Each day, students are being harmed as a result of the epidemic of vaping products in schools. We have work to do, and the kids are counting on us.

Read more:

[Scott Gottlieb: The FDA got it partially right on e-cigs. Here's what else needs to be done.](#)

[The Post's View: Trump backpedals on vaping. Sad!](#)

[David Von Drehle: This vape craze should never have been allowed to happen](#)

[Gabe Albornoz and Adam Zimmerman: Montgomery County should act now to prevent youths from vaping](#)

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