

NEWS

Schools in Worcester implement strategies to deal with surge in student THC use

**Jeff A. Chamer**

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Dozens of drug and tobacco paraphernalia confiscated from students just this year — some more obvious than others — were scattered across the table in the building that houses the Turn It Around drug education program. Among them were flavored vaporizers, lighters and a couple of baggies of weed.

Also present were an assortment of snacks including a Wonka chocolate bar, which, to the untrained eye, may not seem out of the ordinary. In reality, the Wonka bar and other snacks were THC-infused products that had somehow landed in the hands of Worcester public school students.

"The way they're marketing these products it's very fashionable," School Safety Director Robert F. Pezzella said. "Kids get these from older people that are obviously buying it, maybe in cannabis dispensaries, and then selling it to younger kids."

In April of this year, a South High Community School student needed to be transported to the hospital after having a bad reaction to a similar Wonka chocolate bar that they had split with two other friends.

The students were referred to the drug education program that was started by Pezzella and approved for funding by Superintendent Maureen Binienda, whom he credits with helping get the program off the ground.

The South High incident was just one among several others in recent years including two others that occurred in the same week in Fitchburg and Norwood.

It is a problem that has impacted kids throughout the commonwealth, including Worcester.

Jump in child exposure to marijuana after legalization

A study conducted by the Regional Center for Poison Control and Prevention in Massachusetts found that the number of pediatric marijuana exposure calls increased after medical marijuana was legalized in Massachusetts.

The study examined calls to the center that involved the consumption of both single-substance and polysubstance cannabis with youths up to age 19.

According to the study, which examined calls from across Massachusetts four years before and four years after legalization of medical marijuana, the number of calls regarding "single-substance cannabis exposure, especially edible product exposure, in this age group (0-19) showed a statistically significant increase."

The study said that the number of calls for all cannabis product types more than doubled from 29 calls the year before medical marijuana legalization in Massachusetts to 69 calls four years afterwards.

During the study period, which was from 2009 to 2016, it was found that the Poison Control Center received a total of 218 exposure calls involving this age group.

A spokesperson for the center said that there are about 200 pediatric marijuana exposure cases annually in Massachusetts.

The center also provided data regarding pediatric marijuana exposure cases in Worcester County from 2019 to June 2022.

According to the data, Worcester County had six exposure calls in 2019, 19 in 2020, 12 in 2021 and five thus far in 2022.

The spokesperson said that the data may not be completely accurate since employees do not always have time to enter the caller's exact ZIP code, meaning that the numbers could be higher, but are unlikely to be significantly higher.

Treat edibles like medicine, alcohol

Michele Preston, a poison control specialist, said children will sometimes consume edibles by accident due to the fact that many are disguised as regular food or snacks and are not easily identifiable as a THC-infused product.

"Any kid, even if they can read, are gonna see chocolate or candy and they're going to expect that this is something they can eat," Preston said. "Calls that I have received, kids had gotten these out of purses, a glove box, freezers, refrigerators, all of those things."

She recommended that parents treat edibles the same way they would treat medicine or alcohol in their homes — by putting them up high, out of reach and out of sight of children.

However, Pezzella said that students in the district who get caught eating edibles are rarely doing so by accident.

Part of the reason students need medical attention after eating an edible, he said, is because students do not understand that THC-infused edibles have a delayed reaction.

"Students wait for a couple of minutes, they're not getting euphoria or a high, so they're deciding to take another piece," Pezzella said. "All of a sudden, they're getting a feeling that is making them extremely euphoric but where they're getting nauseous."

He said they end up fainting and, in some cases, have to be transported to the local hospital.

Worcester public school students who are caught with edibles, or other substances such as vaporizers, alcohol or drugs, can be referred to the drug education program by a teacher, counselor or some other school administrator. He said parents are also able to enroll their student if they choose.

"We want to keep them in school. We don't want to see them go back to using again, to where they're going to get long-term suspended and then they miss a year of your education," Pezzella said.

Vaporizers one of biggest issues

He said that edibles and marijuana are only part of the problem, as vaporizers have been one of the biggest and most consistent issues in the school system this year.

"I want to expand this program because I got a call from an elementary school principal and he has about five sixth-graders in his school that have been caught vaping in the school," he said.

However, the program is limited to seventh- through 12th-graders, meaning that the sixth-graders who were caught will not be able to participate in the program, Pezzella said.

"We have to come up with another program, hopefully in the next school year," he said. "We don't want to mix sixth graders with 11th- or 12th-graders, as the age difference can cause some issues."

'Better' choices

The current program, which is capped off at five students per day, pairs them up with health educator Beth Rouse and school adjustment counselor Kelly Solitro for the school week.

"We talk a lot in my classroom about our self-esteem, about peer pressure," Rouse said. "It's not just about drugs and alcohol. We have to be whole as a person to be able to make those better choices."

When working with Rouse through the Wellness Project, which she designed, students spend each day discussing and learning about different topics such as underage drinking or the opioid epidemic, reflecting on their choices and learning how to make "better" choices.

She said that, in addition to discussions and reflections, students spend time watching information videos, role-playing through scenarios and learning how to navigate them, as well as learning about how these substances can hinder brain development.

Solitro said that Monday is used to discuss the brain and how it is impacted by substances, Tuesday is devoted to vaping, Wednesday to marijuana, Thursday to alcohol and opiates and Friday is for discussing addiction, communication and drug refusal.

Rouse said that an entire day is devoted to marijuana because she thinks, "that kids get really confused by marijuana because they get mixed messages," Rouse said. "They think, 'If it's legal at 21, why can't I try it now?'"

The issues landing students in the program fluctuate, Rouse said, with younger students getting caught vaping more often and older students getting caught with both marijuana and vaping.

"The vaping issue is kids think it's cool, it's fun, it tastes good. Their friends are doing it, it's more of a peer pressure, trying to fit in. And then they may become addicted to it," Rouse said.

Marijuana 'huge problem'

When it comes to marijuana, she said, "it's a different level," since there are so many options for students to get access to it, whether it is smoking, eating an edible or using a THC cartridge in a vaporizer.

She said that marijuana has become a "huge problem" as students are able to easily get access to different products and are able to hide them since vaporizers are small and easy to conceal, and edibles appear as regular food at a quick glance.

"This isn't a new aspect, but the availability and the way to disguise some of these things in a way to be able to take them without someone knowing creates more access, more problems," she said. "I don't think people really understand the amount of kids that are doing this. I don't think people understand how many kids are being affected by this."

She also pointed to the stress of being a teenager, particularly for older students grappling with preparing for college, as well as the additional stress the pandemic added for all students.

Students who have already tried vaping, she said, will often move onto either "smoking marijuana or this multitude of edibles.

"When my students come in, I ask them what they've experimented with because it's very important for me to understand, so I know what to teach them," Rouse said. "I don't have many high school students say they haven't tried marijuana."

Solitro, who will also cover the classroom and teach some days, pulls students aside for individual work in her office, where she has a punching bag, molding clay and other resources available for them as they work with her.

"We have conversations about, 'How do we fit in without going down the wrong path? Obviously you did this. We're going to help you turn it around and go this way,' " Solitro said.

After working with Solitro, students go through an exit meeting with her. They also go through a second exit meeting, this time virtual, with "the school adjustment counselor at their school, the parent and sometimes the assistant principal, or if any other agencies involved that they want to be part of it."

Solitro said that the exit meetings cover how the student progressed through the program and the Wellness Project, and also gives the opportunity for the student to discuss their previous behavior and explain what they've learned from their experience.

Working with the students does not end for Solitro after they leave the program as she has made an effort to keep in contact with colleagues around the district to keep an eye on the students.

"I'm a school adjustment counselor and I'm a substance abuse clinician, so I just make sure I let all of my colleagues, from middle school up, know why I'm reaching out," Solitro said. "They'll reach out to these kids, they'll keep them on their radar for the rest of the school year."

Having their back

She said that the goal is to ensure students have a trusted adult at the school that they can continue to talk to and who they know will "have their back" if they find themselves in a situation they are having trouble navigating.

In the room just next door to where Pezzella had laid out the confiscated items on a table, five students sat at individual tables watching a video about the dangers of underage drinking and alcohol poisoning.

They were the latest group of students out of the more than 110 that have cycled through the program since the beginning of the year.

Among them was a student who will be identified as Jay, for privacy reasons.

Jay said that he liked the program because he was able to bond with other students throughout the program while learning more about the consequences of using these substances.

He said he appreciated the way the teachers were able to explain the information and get it "through" his head.

"The teacher is very nice and she explains the effects and consequences of drugs well," Jay said. "It makes me think about why it's (substances) even there because there's no purpose to be on it. It just kills your mind."

Jay, who is interested in playing college football at a local college and eventually working in sports management for the Patriots, said that one of the biggest lessons the program taught him was to be cautious of who he accepted things from since it could be laced with dangerous substances.

Pezzella said that it is not clear where kids are getting their hands on these items but that he suspects they may be coming from neighboring states or online.

The flavored vaporizers, which he said are taking "a life of its own," are the strongest evidence that these products are coming across state lines since they are illegal in Massachusetts but legal in New Hampshire.

"We're working very closely with the Worcester police and the Cannabis Control Commission," Pezzella said. "When these have been showing up, we know that they have bar codes, so we're trying to see where these are coming from."

Pezzella, who will continue to work with authorities to try and track down where these items are coming from, said that the drug education program has reached its capacity for high school students through the end of the school year.

Products from other states pose problems

Graham Powell, a doctor at UMass Memorial Medical Center - Memorial Campus, said products coming from other states or the internet pose a problem as they could not only have higher concentrations of THC but they could also be contaminated with other substances.

"A number of edible products that we have seen patients exposed to come from outside of the state or from illicit or unregulated online sources," Powell said. "So there are, at least advertised, higher concentrations of THC in those products and it's hard to verify if those products contain anything else or could be contaminated with anything else."

"Anything is theoretically possible" in terms of what the products could be contaminated with, he said.

However, he cannot say for sure what might contaminate these products since he has not seen any "literature" testing products for these contaminants.

"Just like we've seen in the opioid supply with heroin, more often than not these days being fentanyl in many cases," he said. "I would imagine that, from illicit sources, there is potential for contaminants with other substances."

Powell said that calls to UMass Memorial about kids consuming edibles occur "at least a couple of times, probably at least once a month, on average."

He said that Massachusetts has a "relatively reasonable" cap on the total dosage of THC a product can have. However, if a child is getting their hands on a product that comes from another state that does not have as tight of regulations, they may be consuming far more THC than they thought.

THC, he said, can have a similar effect on kids that a sedative might, with a slower heart rate and less tolerance of changing positions, which could lead to a drop in blood pressure and passing out.

"When we talk about more profound overdoses, that's when we get to those significant sedation, to the point of being described as being unresponsive," Powell said. "You can also see the decrease in oxygen levels because maybe you're so sedated you're not breathing well enough."

Potential for dangerously high dose

Powell also pointed to the potential lack of knowledge kids may have about the delay in effect after consuming an edible.

"The delay in the onset of symptoms and edibles, which can be anywhere from 30 minutes to a few hours, makes the potential of even a normal dose of edibles become dangerous, let alone a really high dose," he said. "We've certainly seen kids eat something like those Oreos, and eat three of them, which is all of a sudden an exceedingly high dose and then suffer more more harmful effects as a result."

In the event that a student ends up getting caught with an edible or some other substance again, they have the option to reenroll in the program, Pezzella said.

Rouse said that the goal of the drug education program is not to scare students into doing what adults want, but rather focus on the health aspect of the conversation while also teaching them the skills to make "better" decisions for themselves.

"The truth of the matter is I can't make them say 'no.' I can only teach them why they would want to say 'no,' what it's doing to their body, make a better choice for them," Rouse said.

She said she takes the time to explain why she is encouraging them to avoid these substances while also helping them develop the skills they need to avoid landing in a similar situation.

"I think that, as a teen, if you just say 'no,' they're just going to ignore you," Rouse said. "Once their eyes are open to the bigger picture of what it's doing and how it's affecting them, they can start caring about themselves and saying, 'I don't want that for me.' "