

NEW ZEALAND

# Anger rises as vaping permeates primary schools

By Sasha Borissenko WELLINGTON

**F**eeling lost and angry over the death of his father, Lucas Sykes started vaping in 2021 after his friends suggested it would help the grieving process. He was 10. What started as a “dumb move” developed into a nicotine addiction, Lucas said.

Although retailers in New Zealand are prohibited from selling products to children, Lucas had no trouble purchasing “very affordable, easy-to-get, and pleasant to taste” vapes from a store just 10 metres from his school.

Despite playing basketball and kickboxing, Lucas now sometimes finds himself “bent over coughing” and unable to breathe. Efforts to stop vaping have led to headaches and worsened anxiety, with his mood going from “cheery to very dark”.

“When I started vaping, I got quite cocky and would be a smart arse to teachers, thinking I was cool and kids would like me,” he said.

Across New Zealand concern about vaping among young children – including those in primary school – is growing. Critics argue regulations and steps to reduce vaping are proving ineffective, in part due to a lack of enforcement. While there is no data yet specifically looking at primary school-age vaping, anecdotal evidence suggests it is on the rise.

Ministry of education figures show 1,945 primary and intermediate school students were removed from school for a short period for vaping or smoking in 2023, up 73% since 2021. More broadly, government studies show youth vaping has risen significantly since 2015. One study found 10% of 14-

to 15-year-olds vape daily, with rates rising among Māori and Pacific youths.

Phil Palfrey, an executive member of the New Zealand Principals’ Federation (NZPF), said that in 39 years as a principal in primary and intermediate schools, he had never seen a fad so popular with students. “When kids as young as eight are putting anything into their lungs that is foreign [it] is just anathema to me,” he said.

In recent years, New Zealand has introduced measures to tackle youth vaping. In 2023, regulations were introduced to reduce the maximum nicotine concentration allowed in single-use vapes and ban specialist vape retailers within 300 metres of schools. All vaping devices must have removable batteries and safety mechanisms.

Advertising vape products is illegal in New Zealand, but specialist vape retailers can advertise to existing customers and promote the use of vaping as an alternative to smoking. However, vape retailers, like those in other countries, have been criticised for marketing strategies aimed at young people. Despite restrictions, Vape Free Kids NZ spokesperson Tammy Downer said manufacturers use brightly coloured advertising and “sneaky” marketing techniques to target children.

The government signalled in November that it would strengthen youth vaping measures. Associate minister for health Casey Costello said although vaping can help reduce cigarette use, the government is committed to strengthening penalties for

retailers that sell to people under 18 and improving support to schools. No decisions have been made, but “regulations are not strong enough”.

A ministry of health spokesperson said it is inappropriate for advertising to appeal specifically to children, and that names like “cotton candy” and “strawberry jelly doughnut” are prohibited.

MoH data suggests there are 1,261 specialist retailers and about 5,760 general vape retailers in New Zealand. Currently, 43 officers monitor compliance by inspecting vaping retailers, investigating complaints and executing controlled purchase operations.

Vaping Industry Association New Zealand, the country’s industry body, did not respond to the Guardian’s queries, but its official stance is that vaping should be limited to adults. “VIANZ is so adamant about this that we ask the public to report stores who sell to youth or anyone, whether a member or not, who targets youth through illegal marketing,” a statement on its website reads.

Now 13, Lucas is still addicted to nicotine. After talking to his mother, Sherryn Eagle, the pair are slowly reducing Lucas’s nicotine intake. Traditional quit-smoking aids have been ineffective, Eagle said.

“I blamed myself for a bit, but I was a widow with two dependent children doing the best I could [and] children are going to [vape] whether we like it or not,” she said.

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▼ New Zealand has tried to tackle youth vaping in recent years

ALEKSANDR YU/GETTY

## 1,945

Number of primary or intermediate school students suspended for vaping or smoking in 2023, up 73% since 2021

## 10%

Portion of 14- to 15-year-olds who vape daily, according to one government study

## 300m

The minimum distance from a school that specialist vape retailers can trade after new regulations were introduced last year

