

## How pervasive is teen vaping? Students at this local high school formed an addiction support group

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Gallery: Orange High School offers students support to quit vaping

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By [Michael K. McIntyre, The Plain Dealer](#)

ORANGE, Ohio – Ahmed Abouelsoud “hit a Juul” last year when a friend offered it to him. He was hooked from the start.

You may not be familiar with the lingo here. “Hitting a Juul” means inhaling nicotine-laced, flavored vapor from a vaping device made by a company called Juul Labs. The device looks like a computer thumb drive. It’s easy to conceal. And it’s the vaping device of choice for many teens, available at the corner gas station, for sale to 18-year-olds who then sell them to younger friends.

Ahmed is hardly alone. Vaping, according to Dr. Scott Gottlieb, commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, is now epidemic among teens.

“I’ve seen it everywhere,” said Edie Ungar-Shafron, the psychologist at [Orange High School](#), where Ahmed is a senior. “It’s pervasive.”

It is everywhere, said Ahmed: “All of my friends and everyone I see and everyone at any social event all have jewels. Everyone our age.”

Ahmed would never consider lighting up a cigarette. They’re nasty, he said. But he loved the feeling when he hit the Juul. The soothing vapor, the mint flavor, the high.

“When I actually started being able to breathe in the smoke and get a buzz, I, like, loved it. It was something unlike I’ve ever done before because I’ve never smoked or done anything,” he said.

And like many teens, he found himself addicted, blowing money on the replacement “pods” and sneaking off to vape in secret at school. When he resolved to quite, he threw his Juul from the balcony of his high-rise apartment. A short time later, having turned 18 and of legal age to purchase, he simply bought another one.

"I've been trying to quit for I don't even know how long but I've never been able to set my mind to it 'til recently," he said. "I've been trying to do it, but I always end up, like, setting myself back and hitting it again."

What changed recently was that Ahmed joined a weekly vaping addiction support group at Orange High School and began sharing his successes and setbacks with fellow students trying to kick the vaping habit.

### Teen vaping epidemic hits home

The FDA says it is cracking down on manufacturers of e-cigarettes because so many underage kids are using them. It's time for a talk with your teen.



It's a surreal experience seeing high school students as young as 15 gather in a small conference room to share addiction stories as if they're at a 12-step meeting. Vaping has become that pervasive.

Juul says it targets smokers, that vaping is a healthier alternative and perhaps a way to quit. Young people provide evidence that there's another market, the kind who go for mango and mint flavors. The kind who, like smokers of their parents' generation, just can't quit.

And it turns out the path to recovery may lie with the teens themselves.

The Orange High School program, called ABC, (For About Change), was the brainchild of Senior Mark Pristash, 18, who was the first to open up to school Ungar-Shafron about his addiction.

"After multiple times of trying to quit by myself, I just didn't know what to do. I didn't think it was possible. I just thought I was way too addicted," he said.

He and the school psychologist walked the school track and talked about coping strategies, about how the first three days are the hardest, about the dangers to Pristash's brain posed by Juuling. "Their brains are under construction and they can't handle it. It's such a horrible chemical," she said.

The sessions motivated him. Months ago, he quit. And then he looked to help the legions of other kids attached to their Juuls.

"Once I got through it, I knew it was possible, and I just wanted to give other students the opportunity to learn how to quit something if they're going through the same thing that I was going through," he said.

So he brought a friend, and then another, and then he and Ungar-Shafron, along with Jessica Venditti, a social worker assigned to the school from the Bellfaire JCB social service agency, created the ABC support group. Students meet on Thursdays -- no administration or other teachers allowed.

Venditti said students tell her that being suspended doesn't help. It just gives them more time at home to vape.

The administration of the school is on board. Students caught vaping at school still face punishment, but the hope is they'd get help before they get in trouble. And those caught with devices are referred to Venditti.

"It's a way that we can get the problem addressed without hammering the students with being out of school and, obviously, the more you're out of school, the more your academics are affected," said Assistant Principal Steve Hardaway.

The ABC group wrote a grant proposal and got \$500 from the PTA for treats and gadgets to occupy fidgety hands. In their sessions, they learn facts about addiction, eat Ungar-Shafron's homemade brownies, plates of assorted cheeses and plenty of fresh fruit. And they share what they're going through.

Abouelsoud laid it bare during one session, after several students talked about how well their recovery was going. He'd had a good stretch of avoiding the Juul, then got tempted ("because everyone is doing it and it's all around you") and was back at it again. He said he hoped to get another new vape-free streak going.

"Peer to peer is so much more impactful than them hearing it from us," said Venditti, who noted that Ahmed's situation is one all of the vaping students will face.

"They're going to have to commit themselves over and over and over again to their goal, even if they've been successful or for a period of time. They're going to walk into a social setting and be faced with a choice. And so they have to keep working at it," she said.

It's amazing to see these young people working at it, and daunting when you consider the small size of the group -- maybe two dozen kids -- relative to the size of the student body, north of 700.

Parents, there's a good chance your child is Juuling, or has close friends -- tempting friends -- who do. It would be great if every school started a peer-to-peer group like Orange did. But even without it, an honest conversation with your child and some old-fashioned parental snooping is in order. This isn't about imposing authority, this is about protecting the health of our kids.

"We had been talking about it and for years he said. 'It's stupid. Anybody that does that is stupid. I don't know why anyone would do that.'," said Laura Kochis, whose son, Jared, a 17-year-old junior is in the group. "And then I found it in his room."

Jared said he hasn't vaped since November after struggling to quit, and blowing his savings, over the summer. He told his mom he'd quit long before he really had.

"It's all him. It's all him and this program," she said. "I mean we can read articles (about the health effects) together. He gets it, I think, because you're showing him some proof. But I think it's the peers that really have helped him get over it."

Peers are the key, said Ungar-Shafron.

"I'm blown away by these kids and the stories they tell," she said. "You had rather not have to have a group like this. But the fact is that we do have to and it seems to be working for many of our kids. It's fantastic."

*Watch "Ideas Sunday" on WVIZ-PBS at 11 a.m. Sunday, Feb. 3, to see the ABC group in action and hear from the students themselves.*

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