

Bill Kaplan: Johnson and vaping vs. kids

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Massachusetts Democratic Attorney General Maura Healey is suing Juul “for creating a youth vaping epidemic by intentionally marketing and selling its e-cigarettes to young people”. This pathbreaking lawsuit lays out bombshell revelations: Juul, 35 percent owned by Altria, one of the world’s largest tobacco companies, is a Silicon Valley start-up death merchant; “the company created an advertising and marketing campaign that explicitly identified its target audience as young people ...”; Juul advertised on millions of websites that appealed to kids, including some in elementary school; it mailed e-cigarettes to underage children and sold its products in stores cited for selling tobacco products to underage youths.

Juul and other vaping companies had \$3.6 billion in sales last year. This has reversed progress in curbing nicotine and tobacco use by underage kids. “More than five million youths – one in four American high school students and one in 10 middle school students – now vape, according to the National Youth Tobacco Survey ...” (NYT). The Wisconsin Department of Health Services reported that vaping by high school youths increased 154 percent from 2014 – 2018, while middle school vaping increased by 272 percent.

Vaping resulted in a surge of hospitalizations of youths with severe lung injuries, beginning in Milwaukee last August. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported 2,758 hospitalized cases, including 64 deaths (about 104 hospitalizations in Wisconsin). The CDC thinks that the tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and other chemicals put in e-cigarettes are linked to the lung injuries and deaths. Moreover, the NYT reported: “No substantive evidence or review process has indicated that the products (e-cigarettes) are safe for long-term use, or that they are successful in getting people to stop smoking cigarettes.”

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However, Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson disingenuously said: “Nobody wants young people, minors, to vape, I don’t want anyone to vape unless you were smoking cigarettes and you were trying to kick a very nasty habit.” Breathtaking! The American Medical Association (AMA) differed: “If we are serious about tackling this epidemic and keeping these harmful products out of the hands of young people, a total ban on all flavored e-cigarettes – in all forms and at all locations – is prudent and urgently needed.”

Johnson, ignoring doctors and public health, lobbied Trump for a public relations regulation of vaping. The Trump Administration’s ban on most flavored e-cigarette cartridges has so many loopholes that kids easily switched to new products such as disposable vape pens. Johnson looks at vapers as a voting constituency, crediting his 2016 reelection to his advocacy for vapers. Other political leaders are listening to doctors.

Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers advocates a statewide public health campaign and other measures to prevent youth vaping. And, Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin supports bipartisan legislation to crack down on the vaping industry. Vaping companies would pay fees to provide tougher federal oversight and fund public health education on the dangers of vaping. Will Johnson join other Republican senators in supporting the bill? Will Johnson continue to support the vaping industry over our kids?

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.