Passage of 100% Tobacco-Free School Policies in North Carolina

Executive Summary

Adam O. Goldstein, MD

Arlana Bobo Peterson, MPH

Kurt M. Ribisl, PhD

Allen Steckler, DrPH

Laura Linnan, ScD

Tim McGloin, MPH

Carol Patterson, MA

UNC Prevention Research Center
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

November **2002**

NC YES is a 3-year research study funded by the CDC Foundation and the American Legacy Foundation to measure the impact of youth empowerment programs in NC focused on tobacco use prevention and control.

In the last two years, efforts have occurred in North Carolina to increase school districts' adoption of 100% tobacco-free school (TFS) policies, in part by promoting teen empowerment programs. National studies show that schools with 100% TFS policies that are enforced have student smoking rates that are lower than schools without a 100% TFS policy.[1] Our evaluation of North Carolina school districts with 100% TFS policies showed that from 1990-2001, 14 of 117 school districts (12.00%) adopted such policies, 7 of which were adopted in 2000 or 2001.

Interviews with 40 key individuals in the school districts that had TFS policies prior to December 2001 revealed several prevailing themes (with quotes illustrating each theme below). Efforts to extend 100% TFS policies in the future may depend on how advocates and school health officials utilize and implement these recommendations from their peers.

Process of Policy Adoption: The majority of 100% TFS policies were adopted with an administrator or other adult initiating the change, but youth participation in policy change increased in 2000–2001. Of the 7 school districts that adopted policies in 2000–2001, 5 had evidence of youth involvement and/or initiation. Youth advocated with the school board, testified at school board meetings, attended a Governor's youth tobacco summit, petitioned other youth, surveyed fellow students, and collaborated with coalitions. In virtually all cases, one or more adults and/or youth acted as champion(s) for the policy efforts.

"Students proposed the school to be 100% tobacco free…
The Board accepted the student's proposal." —*Superintendent*

"I just raised hell…I just put it forth to the School Board that we had to go tobacco-free. I kept pushing until we got it to a vote." —*School Board Member*

Political Leadership and Policy Adoption: A N.C. Governor's policy summit in January 2000, along with a letter to school boards, played an important role in stimulating the adoption of 100% TFS policies in 6 of the 7 school districts that adopted such policies after January 2000. The Governor of N. C. in January 2000, James B. Hunt, sponsored a youth summit on teen tobacco use. In 2001, Governor Hunt's successor, Mike Easley, sent a letter, along with the Superintendent of Instruction, supporting the adoption of 100% TFS policies.

"The new Superintendent found Easley's letter and
thought it was common sense. He brought it to the School Board…….
It was truly that Governor's letter." —*Coalition Coordinator*

"It was precipitated by the Governor's summit on tobacco use … It helped having encouragement from the Governor. It helped the School Board." —*District Health Officer*

"The youth summit infused the youth. Without that, (it would have been) a lot harder to get them together. Empowerment started there." —*Health Education Director*

Barriers to Policy Adoption: Concern about loss of teachers or inability to enforce policies did not materialize. Keys were being consistent, supportive and firm, especially at sporting events. School districts also appeared to have given sufficient transition time for adjusting to the policy, disseminated signs announcing the decision, treated violations seriously like other policy violations, and offered alternatives to suspension along with cessation programs.

"There has been no confrontation or escorting off (the premises) since the adoption of the 100% tobacco free policy." —*Safe/Drug Free School Coordinator*

"There was no adverse reaction from staff."—*Superintendent*

"(there are) PA announcements at football games, several times during the game. (We are) polite and give thanks for complying... Reminders really help. We had a big sign at the entrance." —*Superintendent*

"(there are) posted 'Smoke Free School' signs at ball games and visibly all around campuses. If they're caught, they get a choice...go to alternative suspension program or go to suspension…" —*District Employee*

Methods of Policy Adoption: Advocates focused on persuasive messages that personalized health concerns and emphasized appropriate adult role modeling for youth.

"We got support from those affected by smoking, such as asthma patients, football fans and players, and band affiliates. The band was crucial because members could not choose where they sat in the stadium." —*Coalition Coordinator*

"A school assembly [was held] with victims from SAVE [Survivors and Victims of Tobacco Empowerment Project]. They made a video to show at the school assembly." —*Teacher*

"I really think it does not help if all day students are taught not to smoke and then teachers smoke—teachers are sending them mixed messages if you are gonna teach that in school. It [no smoking policy] helps with hypocrisy." —*Youth*

Tobacco Farming and Policy Adoption: Although concern was expressed that high tobacco farming/manufacturing communities would face greater barriers in passing policies, there was little evidence such issues negatively affected the adoption of TFS policies in these 14 school districts. In part, this occurred because most, but not all, of the districts where TFS policies were adopted were located in areas with minimal tobacco farming.

"Tobacco is not grown here. It may be more difficult in some areas. In those areas, work on getting community support. We went top down but it may not work in other counties. Bottom up may be the solution." —*Youth Program Coordinator*

"This is a county that grows tobacco. The School Board did it with no fanfare. This is what needed to be done." —*School Board Member*

Conclusions: Our research into the adoption of 100% TFS policies in North Carolina demonstrates several important themes.

1. Policy change can occur by adult or student-led models, but key ingredients are a scientific imperative (i.e. smoking cessation and prevention) and leadership of those making the change (i.e. school principal, board member, superintendent).
2. Efforts to identify champions or to support those identified should help the adoption of 100% TFS policies. One method to improve collaboration between youth and adults is to ensure that both groups from schools attend important planning meetings, such as a Governor's Summit on youth tobacco use.
3. Our research shows that policy makers can clearly help districts adopt 100% TFS policies. For instance, school tobacco summits and letters sent to school districts by Governors of North Carolina stimulated

policy change, deflected criticism from the School Boards and staff and mobilized coalitions. The leadership for such initiatives should come from the highest levels of state government and public instruction.

4. Personalizing health risks and emphasizing role modeling for youth by adults will assist in the passage of 100% TFS policies. Personalization can occur by discussing the effects of secondhand smoke on asthmatic children in the school, involuntary exposure of band members at football games, elevated risks to your own or your child's health or long-term consequences of tobacco addiction such as cancer, heart disease or emphysema. Recent research shows students' exposure to outdoor teacher smoking on school premises is associated with higher rates of student smoking behavior. [2,3]
5. Enforcement problems are less problematic than anticipated, a finding that can be used to negate misconceptions or fears that could lead to defeat. We know of some districts that have voted not to extend bans on youth smoking to adults or visitors on school grounds, citing concerns that parents would object or that enforcement would be difficult. To overcome this obstacle, school districts that adopted 100% TFS policies recommended that the policies be not only firm and enforceable, but also have frequent reminders and be visible to all staff, students and visitors. Firm but supportive reminders about the policy appear especially necessary at sporting events.

Limitations: The information from the interviews are based on success stories from 14 of the 117 school districts in the state. Although these districts represented all those that had adopted 100% TFS policies at the time of the data collection (2000-2001), it is unknown if their paths to success as early policy adopters will reflect the same experiences as those passing policies in the next few years. School districts that reject policy changes are different than those that adopt them. For instance, passing 100% TFS policies in counties with significant tobacco farming may require additional resources and strategies. We also have insufficient data about the outcomes associated with enforcement practices.

Bibliography

1. Wakefield MA, Chaloupka FJ, Kaufman NJ, et al. Effect of restrictions on smoking at home, at school, and in public places on teenage smoking: cross sectional study. *British Medical Journal* 2000; 321: 333-336.
2. Molyneux A, Lewis S, Antoniak M, et al. Is smoking a communicable disease? Effect of exposure to ever smokers in school tutor groups on the risk of incident smoking in the first year of secondary school. *Tobacco Control* 2002;11:241-245.
3. Poulsen LH, Osler M, Roberts C, et al. Exposure to teachers smoking and adolescent smoking behaviour: analysis of cross sectional data from Denmark. *Tobacco Control* 2002; 11: 246-251.

Acknowledgements

The North Carolina Youth Empowerment Study is supported by a grant from the American Legacy Foundation with collaboration from the CDC Foundation and scientific and technical assistance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The analyses, interpretations, and conclusions reached in this report are those of the authors, not The America Legacy Foundation, or the CDC Foundation, their respective staff, or their respective Board of Directors.

UNC Prevention Research Center is part of the
UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention
http://www.hpdp.unc.edu/NCYes/