

Student vaping is a familiar challenge for Andrew Waite, LMSW and Anne Hughes, MSN, RN, FNP-BC. Andrew is the Program Supervisor of Adolescent Health at the Grand Traverse County Health Department (GTCHD) and Anne is a Nurse Practitioner at the Youth Health & Wellness Center, a School-based Health Center (SBHC) funded by the GTCHD. The SBHC is located on the campus of Career Tech Center in Traverse City, MI – a vocational school that draws over 1200 students from 25 area high schools across the five-county area covered by the Traverse Bay Intermediate School District.



## Integrating Technology to Increase Youth Engagement

Andrew and Anne have always looked to adopt innovative approaches to reach more youth with effective and evidence-based interventions.

Staff at the Youth Health & Wellness Center have used the Rapid Assessment for Adolescent Preventive Services© (RAAPS) from Possibilities for Change (P4C) to identify and reduce youth risk behaviors in their SBHC for over a decade. They were also early adopters of P4C's Adolescent Counseling Technology for Nicotine & Tobacco (ACT-NT) as an original beta site. During the last two years, they collaborated with school administration on a unique modification of vaping policy used in conjunction with ACT-NT and cessation interventions.

ACT-NT is an interactive, evidence-based health assessment and counseling system that uses innovative technology shown to increase positive behavior change. Developed with funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), ACT-NT was created to provide an engaging platform for youth while also ensuring quality, evidence-based cessation coaching that works with professionals, optimizing their time to properly address nicotine and tobacco risk. ACT-NT identifies which nicotine products a youth is using, how often - *and why*. Identifying what triggers nicotine usage (peer influence, stress, addiction) and what might motivate them to make a change is critical in providing a tailored, effective action plan to quit.

The Youth Health & Wellness Center uses ACT-NT in two ways:

1. as a tool to support nicotine and tobacco cessation counseling during routine clinical visits to the SBHC
2. as part of their vaping cessation programming offered in partnership with the school.



## Workflows That Work

*"Youth participate using a hand-held tablet in our waiting room," Anne explained. "They are extremely honest with this method of data collection and intervention – to be honest, shockingly so at times!"*

*"Also, by taking ACT-NT before we meet it 'uncorks' the conversation. When we go in to have a discussion the youth are very open; they tell us more and more as the conversation goes on."*

*"Having education within the online module is also very helpful. Students get tired of listening to us 'spout our advice.' They are much more willing to have education come in the form they are familiar with and prefer. They want to get information online – it's how they study, how they work in school – and it's helpful to have it presented that way."*

## Pairing Policy & Programming To Reduce Vaping in Traverse City, MI

On the Career Tech Center campus, where the Youth Health & Wellness Center is located, the class curriculum is based on a short, 2.5-hour school day. Students can choose to participate in either a morning or afternoon session. Due to this unique format – both teachers and students are reluctant to miss a lot of class time. Despite the priority placed on attendance, however, the school's approach to vaping has been especially strict. First-time offenders may receive a ticket from campus safety officers and second-time offenders receive a five-day suspension.

*"In part, this strict approach to vaping is driven by concerns for safety. In a vocational setting, students work with a lot of heavy machinery and safety is paramount. If the school is unsure what exactly is in a student's vape (e.g., nicotine or THC), then they can't be sure the student isn't impaired when using critical equipment on campus," Anne explained.*

*"We've reached out to work collaboratively with the school leadership," added Andrew. "We understand the administration's concerns that are driving the zero-policy approach. However, we also understand that adolescent behaviors are complicated and changing those behaviors is a challenge. You can't just tell a teen 'don't do it'. That doesn't work for us as adults, and it's even less effective with youth."*

Working together, the school and SBHC have found a middle ground designed to balance the need for control and discipline with the desire to keep students in school while supporting their mental and physical health. Currently the school will "hold" three days of the five-day suspension for all students who agree to participate in a vaping cessation program with the Youth Health & Wellness Center.

All youth who participate in the vaping cessation program at the Youth Health & Wellness Center receive access to ACT-NT in conjunction with in-person counseling provided by the SBHC staff over three separate sessions or visits. The SBHC staff tackle a wide-variety of topics within these, in-person educational sessions of the vaping program, including discussions about the adolescent brain, how "reward pathways" work, and why addiction in teens can occur so rapidly and be so powerful.

*"One of the strengths of the adolescent brain is it's wired to learn faster – and one of the consequences is they become addicted faster," Andrew explained. "Adolescents are more vulnerable. It's one of the key reasons why an innovative partnership with the school that supports effective nicotine cessation programming is so important. It's very common for an addicted student who has had their vape equipment confiscated to start smoking cigarettes because a friend has one on hand. That's the complete opposite of what schools, parents, and we as providers, are trying to achieve!"*

### Vaping Presents Unique Challenges for Schools and School-Based Health Centers



Dealing with vaping in schools is complex. School administrators need to ensure a nicotine-free environment and in the effort to achieve a vape-free zone many schools are implementing "zero-tolerance" policies. But youth vaping goes so much deeper than a broken school policy. Similar to the use of any addictive substance – nicotine use dramatically affects a youth's physical and mental health.

For students who are "caught" in their initial use or experimentation with vaping, early identification provides an opportunity to identify the reasons why the youth engaged in this risky behavior and intervene. For students who are already addicted, banning them from vaping with zero-tolerance policies will have very little impact on their behavior, yet can potentially remove these higher-risk students from much-needed education. **With 1 in 4 US teens reporting they have vaped, the scope of the issue demands scalable, effective solutions.**

While Anne and Andrew's team has the benefit of integrating ACT-NT within a series of follow-up visits, the system is designed to keep youth engaged between and beyond SBHC visits with an individually Personalized Action Plan and follow-up text messages that continue to support their day-to-day efforts.

## Outcomes & What's Next

After implementing the policy and program changes, the staff at the Youth Health & Wellness Center observed more students ask about quitting and self-report that they were reducing their use of vaping. Data from the ACT-NT assessments further supports these findings.

- 30% of students report nicotine or tobacco use
- Of those: 87% vape, 30% smoke cigarettes, 20% blunts, 4% cigars, and 2% chew

And among those students who used ACT-NT and completed all three sessions of the vaping cessation program: **64% showed a decrease in nicotine use**

Anne shared that the benefits of ACT-NT extended well beyond the data. *"I was thrilled to have a tool that could evaluate tobacco use, evaluate nicotine use, and educate about that – it kind of runs itself,"* explained Anne. *"That was a very positive thing for us as clinicians."*

So, what's next for this innovative collaboration? Andrew and Anne hope to increase prevention education at the middle school level. *"We need to reach more youth in fifth and sixth grade when they've had minimal exposure,"* explained Andrew. *"Before they have fully formed behaviors and thoughts – this is where prevention strategies will be most effective, and we can have a great health impact for future high schoolers."* In addition, they are looking to do more outreach and education with parents – helping them understand vaping and be more effective in their communication on the topic with their daughters and sons.

### ACT-NT Includes 3 Critical Components:

1. Assessment of Risk & Behaviors
2. Tailored Risk Coaching & Action Plan
3. Continued Engagement via Text



Possibilities for Change offers a variety of educational resources on vaping and nicotine reduction designed to support the unique needs of schools and clinicians.

For more information visit [PossibilitiesforChange.com/ACT](https://PossibilitiesforChange.com/ACT) or email [info@pos4chg.org](mailto:info@pos4chg.org).