

Last of N.C. schools adopt no tobacco policies

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July 28, 2008

Charlotte Observer

<http://www.charlotte.com/205/story/732286.html>

The last handful of North Carolina's school districts have adopted broad no-smoking policies in recent weeks - falling in line with the rest of the state's school systems in a move that supporters see as proof the state is shedding some of its loyalty to tobacco.

Now all 115 North Carolina school districts have adopted anti-tobacco policies which stretch beyond school grounds to off-campus events. School districts had until Aug. 1 to adopt policies that forbid smoking and tobacco use by students, teachers, family members and visitors. That means coaches will no longer be able to smoke at games and schools no longer can have designated smoking areas for faculty members.

"Adults, especially on school grounds, are seen as role models for young people, and so it was important for adults to be role models for young people throughout the school day," said Mark Ezzell, director of the state's Tobacco-Free Schools Program which helped school districts craft their plans. "If a young person saw a coach or a teacher or an adult who they respected smoking or chewing tobacco, they would obviously think that's an OK thing to do."

An exception is made for adult chaperones who travel out-of-state while supervising school trips, Ezzell said. Under the policies, those chaperones are permitted to use tobacco, so long as they're not near children when doing so.

The Tobacco-Free Schools program, funded by the N.C. Health and Wellness Trust Fund, is providing signs to schools to aide in compliance, Ezzell said.

But people who violate the policies won't face tickets or punishments.

"The trick is not to punish them but to simply remind them of the policy," Ezzell said.

About 22.5 percent of North Carolina high school students smoke - slightly more than the national average of 20 percent, according to a 2007 study by the U.S. Center for Disease Control.

In 2003, when the Tobacco-Free Schools program started assisting school boards in crafting their plans, 14 districts had adopted broad anti-tobacco policies.

By the middle of 2007, 87 districts had the plans in place.

The General Assembly then passed a law requiring the remaining school districts - many of which Ezzell said were in rural or tobacco-producing parts of the state - to adopt smoke-free policies by Aug. 1.

That looming state deadline was the only reason the Alamance-Burlington school board approved the plan, said chairman Tom Manning, noting that the system already had a policy which prohibited smoking in schools and at outdoor campus events, such as football games.

Manning questioned how the new policy required by state law can be enforced, particularly at off-campus events.

"I think it's a case of good intentions really translating into not so good policy," Manning said. "We thought the policy we had was effective."

Rep. Cary Allred, R-Alamance, tried unsuccessfully this year to have the provision applying to off-campus events stripped from state law. He said the policy goes "overboard" and will prevent adults from partaking in a legal activity.

But Ezzell said a national study indicates that schools with comprehensive smoke-free policies have lower youth smoking rates.

"We recognize and understand and respect the part ... that tobacco is an important part of North Carolina's history and past," Ezzell said. "But what's really important to most North Carolinians is the state's future, and that's our children."