

Legalizing Recreational Marijuana Carries Consequences for our Youths

By State Rep. Lyndon Yearick

I oppose the legalization of recreational marijuana. Proponents have made multiple arguments in favor of legalization, but none of these rationalizations justifies the impact increasing the availability of cannabis could have on Delaware's children and young adults. I am deeply troubled over the ample evidence that marijuana use among juveniles undermines their health and academic futures, carrying consequences that will ripple forward throughout their lives.

Colorado was one of the first states to legalize marijuana. According to a state report – “Monitoring Health Concerns Related to Marijuana in Colorado: 2016” – one-in-four adults (ages 18-25) had reported using marijuana in the past month with one-in-eight using daily or nearly daily. The report noted that these numbers had been consistent since retail marijuana sales began in January 2014.

Marijuana use is also widespread among adolescents. According to one survey, almost one-in-five U.S. high school students reported using marijuana in the previous 30 days. Those percentages increase by grade level. The 2017 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS), which included more than 50,000 respondents, revealed that marijuana use among 9th graders was 11% percent and rose to 25.7% by 12th grade. The 2015-16 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) indicated a gradual increase in youth use from 2006-07 (9.1%) to 2013-14 (12.6%); however, the last two years showed decreased use, with 9.1% reporting use versus the national average 6.8% in 2015-16. Using the NSDUH, underage consumption of marijuana in Colorado is 33% higher than the national average.

Legalization carries with it a message – a government endorsement of marijuana's safety and relative risk. This belief was validated in a study performed by researchers at UC Davis and Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health published in JAMA Pediatrics (February 2017). More than a quarter-million 8th and 10th grade students were surveyed in Washington before and after that state legalized recreational marijuana. Following legalization, “perceived harmfulness” declined 14.2% among the 8th graders and 16.1% for those in 10th grade. Marijuana use among these students trended up modestly (two to four percent) from 2010 to 2015.

This finding is disconcerting because marijuana use can be quite detrimental to teens and young adults.

Most neuroscientists now believe the brain remains under development through early adulthood. Staci Gruber, Ph.D., a neuroscientist investigating the impacts of marijuana at McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School, said the brain is still under construction at least until the early or mid-20s. She added that during this period the brain is thought to be particularly sensitive to damage from drug exposure and the frontal cortex — the

region critical to planning, judgment, decision-making, and personality — is one of the last areas to develop fully.

Researchers at Canada's Waterloo University studied what happens to academic goals, engagement, preparedness, and performance when high school students begin using marijuana. Examining nearly 27,000 students in grades 9 through 12, the study found that students who started smoking pot regularly were less likely to get good grades or to pursue a college education. When students began using marijuana at least once a month they were about four times more likely to skip class; two-to-four times less likely to complete their homework; and nearly half as likely to achieve high grades.

"We found that the more frequently students started using the drug, the greater their risk for poor school performance," said Karen Patte, lead author of the study.

It is not just juveniles who choose to use marijuana that are under threat. The Retail Marijuana Public Health Advisory Committee – a group established by the State of Colorado – reported in 2016 that at least 14,000 children in that state were at risk of accidentally eating improperly stored marijuana products and at least 16,000 were at risk of being exposed to secondhand marijuana smoke in the home. "The committee found strong evidence such accidental exposures can lead to significant clinical effects that, in some cases, require hospitalization," the report stated.

Had it been enacted, the bill that sought to legalize recreational marijuana in Delaware last year (House Bill 110) was expected to produce about \$30 million in new annual state revenue. This estimate excludes any expenses with the implementation and regulation of the program.

Consider that the operating budget recently proposed by Governor John Carney for Fiscal Year 2020 budget is \$4.4 billion, with public education accounting for more than a third of this spending. In other words, legalizing marijuana would have increased state revenue by less than three-quarters of one percent.

We should not be needlessly risking the academic performance of thousands of our students, as well as the healthy mental development of our young adults, by enabling marijuana use. Mortgaging their future for any amount of monetary gain is a foolish bargain.