

## [Opinion Columns](#)

### **Katie Morlock: Flavored tobacco is hooking Olmsted County youth**

Many of my students can't explain to me what's in their vape — they just know they like the feeling they get when they sneak a puff between classes.



Katie Morlock

Contributed

**By Katie Morlock**

May 02, 2026 at 7:30 AM

One of the most concerning realities in schools right now is that students are using highly addictive substances, like nicotine and tobacco, without knowing or understanding the health risks.

The tobacco industry's age-old tactics of cute and bright packaging, sweet and fruity flavors, and easy access are deliberately leading our students to think these products are safe. Many of them don't realize it's tobacco, and it's harming their body and mind.

There is a common misunderstanding among young people that e-cigarettes are low risk, or at least not serious enough to worry about. This misconception is not accidental. The tobacco industry purposefully designs products to feel approachable and look harmless to avoid raising red flags.

As a result, the number of young people using e-cigarettes is increasing — even right here in Olmsted County. And it's not limited to older teenagers. Middle school students are also being exposed, and in some cases actively using. I have even witnessed kids as young as fifth grade bringing a vape to school.

As a school administrator, I see the direct impact flavored tobacco is having on the physical and mental health of my students and their ability to stay focused in the classroom. I also see the lack of education on these addictive products. Many of my students can't explain to me what's in their vape — they just know they like the feeling they get when they sneak a puff between classes.



A Juul vape arranged for a photograph in Brooklyn, New York, on July 6, 2018. Gabby Jones / Bloomberg

What makes this especially challenging in a school setting is how it shows up in learning. Students dealing with nicotine dependence or addiction often struggle to stay present. They're asking to leave class frequently to manage an addiction they may not even fully

understand themselves. This inability to stay engaged and focused impacts every facet of their day.

An added challenge is how easy it is to hide and access these products and devices. Many are designed to look like everyday items, and even teachers are surprised by how discreet they are. We see students with vapes that look like highlighters, or they are so small that they can fit in the string of a hooded sweatshirt.

We are also seeing a negative, ripple effect for students who don't vape but still have to navigate around it. It's affecting their social development and friendships. Some avoid shared spaces, like the bathroom, because that's where their peers are using. Others are exposed to vaping so frequently and indirectly that they begin to accept it as normal behavior.

Vaping is increasingly one of the most common issues we deal with at school, and the prevalence of it grows year over year. While already stretched thin, schools are putting significant time, resources and effort into responding.

At Stewartville High School, we are intentionally moving beyond a typical "discipline" approach and have strong partnerships in place with various community health organizations. Together, we are giving kids the additional tools and support they need to identify and address the root cause of their use or addiction.

But those resources are not enough on their own. Our students face constant misinformation and targeted marketing from the tobacco industry that relies on paid influencers, popular social media pages, and predatory, candy-like ads. Flavored tobacco products that target young people need stronger regulation and accountability.

Olmsted County can follow the lead of 34 other communities around the state and put the health of our kids first. Let's start the conversation to stop the sale of flavored tobacco right here, right now. Without any changes, there is no end in sight, and our kids will continue becoming addicted to tobacco.

*Katie Morlock, of Stewartville, is principal of Stewartville High School.*