

Recreational marijuana: What schools fear most about the legalization in New York

[David Robinson and Joseph Spector](#), Albany Bureau Published 8:25 a.m. ET March 7, 2019

In the debate over whether New York should legalize marijuana, a potent force is becoming more vocally opposed: schools.

At least one district has [already issued a resolution](#) in opposition and statewide school organizations are increasingly raising concerns over New York's move toward recreational marijuana.

Educators' criticisms focus largely on the potential impact on students already enticed by vaping, cigarettes and opioids.

"As a child welfare issue, we are gravely concerned that the legalization of recreational marijuana is going to be really harmful to our children," said Kyle Belokopitsky, executive director of the state Parent Teacher Association.

The state Legislature and Gov. Andrew Cuomo are negotiating [whether to include the legalization of recreational marijuana](#) in the state budget for the fiscal year that starts April 1.

If a deal can't be reached, lawmakers would have until the end of the legislative session in mid-June to strike an agreement. Otherwise, it would likely languish until 2020.

So with the short window, some school groups are boosting their efforts to beat back the measure.

"As a society, we've been unable to stop the things we seem to think are legally allowable for adults from filtering down to children," said David Little, executive director of the state Rural Schools Association.

"And yet somehow we seem to be marching ahead with the legalization of marijuana without factoring in the societal effects it will have when kids start using it and the implication that it's legal so it must be OK."

Supporters, however, said the law wouldn't lead to significant problems for schools, and they point to the negligible impact in Colorado as an example.

What's at stake

School groups are joining law enforcement leaders across New York [in opposing recreational pot](#).

Police said it would cause an enforcement nightmare for them and lead to more impaired drivers on the roads.

School leaders offered similar concerns.

The state Council of School Superintendents is supporting legislation to [raise the legal age to 21 to buy tobacco and electronic cigarettes](#). Recreational marijuana would also be banned for purchase by anyone under 21.

The council is also asking the Legislature to delay any decision on marijuana until after budget.

Schools said they haven't received assurances that allowing recreational pot in New York would mean more state aid to combat potential substance-abuse problems.

"We believe the costs to schools will outweigh any benefit from additional revenue provided by the state," said Michael Borges, executive director of the state Association of School Business Officials of New York.

Some powerful school groups, though, haven't taken a position on the issue, including the New York State United Teachers union and the School Boards Association.

More: [New York marijuana: What to know about black-market forces threatening recreational pot](#)

More: [Recreational marijuana: Police, doctors and educators fighting legalization in New York](#)

The battle in Albany

Democrats who control the state Legislature and the Democratic governor are largely in support of joining 10 other states in legalizing weed.

Legislative leaders have continued to signal that a deal likely won't be done as part of the state budget, citing the complexity of the bill.

But Cuomo is imploring them to get it done in the budget, saying it could be left undone if it lingers past April 1.

"I think it's a mistake to leave it for afterwards," Cuomo said Monday on WAMC, a public radio station in Albany. "It's difficult and it's controversial. That's why I say do it in the budget."

Supporters, meanwhile, said the issues raised by schools are outweighed by the criminal-justice problems that would be resolved if marijuana is regulated and taxed.

Marijuana arrests have disproportionately affected poor communities of color, and many advocates want the tax revenue from legalization to go back into helping those neighborhoods.

"The whole point of the law, the bulk of it anyway, is to stop the extraordinary damage to thousands of lives a year that are done by the criminal-justice system in very selectively enforcing our current law," said Assembly Health Committee chairman Richard Gottfried, D-Manhattan.

A majority of the public also supports it. A [Siena College poll in January found voters](#) in New York backed legalizing marijuana 56 percent to 41 percent.

More: [Marijuana in New York: Here's how Andrew Cuomo plans to legalize, tax it](#)

More: [Marijuana: Cities, towns could opt-out under Andrew Cuomo's plan](#)

Experience in Colorado



DENVER, CO - FEBRUARY 11: Denver high school social studies teacher Nick Childers chants as teachers picket outside South High School on February 11, 2019 in Denver, Colorado. Denver teachers are striking for the first time in 25 years after the school district and the union representing the educators failed to reach an agreement after 14 months of contract negotiations over teacher pay. (Photo by Michael Ciaglo/Getty Images) ORG XMIT: 775295992 ORIG FILE ID: 1097895682 (Photo: Michael Ciaglo, Getty Images)

Political fights over legal marijuana reaching students and derailing academic futures originated in Colorado, which allowed cannabis for adults in 2012.

Yet dire predictions of more marijuana-dazed teens getting into trouble and dropping out of school have proven unfounded thus far, according to the state's Division of Criminal Justice.

The agency recently cited surveys and school-related data on the effects of legalized cannabis on Colorado youth.

Among the findings:

- The percentage of students using marijuana in their lifetime remained stable between 2005 and 2017, at around 35 percent.
- Students reporting more regular "past 30-day use" of marijuana similarly stayed flat at about 19 percent.

- The graduation rate rose from a 10-year low point of 72 percent in 2010 to 79 percent in 2017.
- Over that same period, the drop-out rate decreased from 3.1 percent to 2.3 percent.
- The number of suspensions and expulsions for drugs remained relatively stable at between 4,500 and 5,000.

Marijuana advocates described the findings as a reason to refocus on more-pressing public health and safety threats to youth.

“Gun violence, opioid abuse, heroin, alcohol; those are epidemics in our state,” said state Rep. Edie Hooton, a Democrat representing the liberal-leaning Boulder region.

“Consequences of teen use of marijuana is not considered an epidemic in any sector, whether it’s law enforcement or medicine,” she added.

But public-health agencies like the National Institute for Drug Abuse have warned high-potency marijuana and edibles pose a growing threat to children as legal cannabis spreads.

Marijuana taxes and schools

A recent Colorado teachers’ strike dispelled any illusions of marijuana tax revenues saving financially strained schools.

The roughly \$40 million of marijuana dollars funneled to Colorado school construction each year fell short of funding gaps, prompting voter complaints of being misled about fiscal benefits of legalizing cannabis.

Images of teachers picketing for higher pay outside aging schools in need of renovation dominated media coverage. Administrators scrambled to educate voters on how cannabis cash gets spent.

Denver’s Jeffco Public Schools district had previously explained it took in about \$2 million in marijuana money, a fractional slice of its budgetary pie for 86,000-plus students.

“To put it another way, less than a third of a penny in every dollar in Jeffco’s budget comes from marijuana funds,” [Superintendent Jason Glass wrote in 2017](#).

“While we appreciate these additional dollars, they are earmarked for specific purposes and the amount is so small that it has far from solved our budget issues.”

Budget gaps statewide in Colorado hammered home the education funding crisis.

“We predicted a nearly \$18 billion need in capital construction, so \$40 million isn’t really resolving that problem,” said Jeremy Meyer, a state Department of Education spokesman.

In addition to the construction money, Colorado schools received tens of millions of marijuana dollars for behavioral health, anti-bullying, dropout prevention and early literacy programs.

But the cannabis education funding total was about \$90 million last year, still less than 2 percent of the state’s \$5.6 billion education budget.

Meanwhile, the state’s overall haul from marijuana taxes, licenses and fees has grown significantly since 2014, rising from about \$68 million to more than \$250 million last year.

More: [Is marijuana addictive? What to know as New York recreational marijuana debate heats up](#)

More: [Marijuana tax, congestion pricing would help fund NYC subways in Cuomo, de Blasio plan](#)

New York’s marijuana money

New York expects to take in [about \\$300 million](#) in marijuana revenue per year once fully implemented, but it’s unclear how the cannabis money would get divvied up.

In contrast to Colorado’s education focus, Cuomo’s plan doesn’t set aside marijuana money for schools.

Unspecified amounts would go to programs, such as traffic safety, addiction treatment and small-business development, as well as public health education and intervention.

The bill, however, also noted cannabis cash would initially cover costs associated with regulating the industry, suggesting limited leftovers for other programs.

[A separate proposal by state lawmakers](#) would take about half of the marijuana revenue and put it toward grants for "community-based non-profits."

Those grants would go to job training, mental-health treatment and adult education in communities "disproportionately affected by past federal and state drug policies."

Cuomo also proposed using some of the revenue [to fund transit upgrades in New York City and its suburbs](#).

School groups said they would like a specific funding stream to go to substance abuse programs in their districts if the law is approved.

Sen. Shelley Mayer, a Yonkers Democrat who chairs the Senate Education Committee, said she has "heard many concerns inside my district and outside my district" and will look to address their concerns as part of any legislation this year.

"There's a strong fear that it will be accessible to younger people and I'm going to work with my conference to make sure that the voices of these parents, particularly, are heard as we discuss it," she s

Schools weigh response

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Mary Fox Alter, superintendent of the Pleasantville school district, sits on a panel during an editorial board meeting at The Journal News headquarters in White Plains on Tuesday, December 6, 2016. (Photo: John Meore/The Journal News)

The Pleasantville board of education, located in a small village in Westchester County, [approved a resolution in January](#) that outlined the trustees' opposition to recreational marijuana.

In the weeks that followed, Superintendent Mary Fox-Alter said she heard from colleagues and superintendents in the region who inquired about the resolution, which outlined reasons for their resistance and recommendations.

"The message of slowing it down, taking it out of the budget process, having a forum where more information can be shared ... are things that resonate with people," she said.

At least 17 "listening sessions" were held around the state last year, including one in Westchester, to garner public input on the topic, [according to the governor's office](#).

John Mueller, a Pleasantville parent with three children, also opposes the bill.

"The current legislation is embedded in the budget; it should be debated on the open floor," he said. "Every local municipality should have the right to opt out."

Indeed, Cuomo's proposal would let [local governments opt out](#) of allowing marijuana sales in their communities.

More: [Marijuana in New York: How much tax is too much? And who should benefit?](#)

More: [Video: 'I would have laughed. But then I realized this is Albany'](#)

Across New York

Other districts are taking more of a wait-and-see attitude.

Krista Grose, spokeswoman for the Webster Central School District, located in the northeast corner of Monroe County, said the district hasn't discussed how they'll tackle weed on campus yet.

"At this time, Webster CSD doesn't have a plan in place relative to the possible legalization of marijuana in New York State," Grose said in an email.

But she said Superintendent Carmen Gumina "is wholly opposed to the legalization of marijuana in our state."

In the Southern Tier, Windsor Superintendent Jason Andrews said even though New York would ban marijuana purchase for those under 21, he is concerned it would certainly filter down to teenagers.

"Also, I would like to see this issue resolved separately from budget negotiations and given enough time for debate and revisions," he said.

Includes reporting by Journal News staff writer Colleen Wilson, Democrat and Chronicle staff writer Georgie Silvarole, Press & Sun-Bulletin staff writer Ashley Biviano and Albany Bureau correspondent Jon Campbell.