

New proposal to increase smoking age to 21

Everyone knows about the recent “Vape Epidemic” that has invaded high schools all over the country. It’s not really surprising that new legislation was proposed to raise the legal age to consume tobacco from 18 to 21. But this proposal is not the right solution.

The proposal first passed the Virginia Senate on Jan. 29 on a lopsided 32-to-8 vote and then passed the Virginia House on Feb. 11 on a 66-to-30 vote. The bill now goes to Gov. Ralph Northam, a former pediatrician, who as a state senator led a successful effort to ban smoking in Virginia restaurants.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention said in a report this week that 4.9 million middle and high school students were current users of some type of tobacco product in 2018, up from 3.6 million in 2017. Almost 21 percent of middle and high school aged students have tried e-cigarettes.

Although statistics do show an increased amount vaping and e-cigarette use in the past year, I don’t think raising the age will prevent teens from picking up the habit.

During the 1990s, for example, three communities in Massachusetts implemented a vigorous enforcement campaign against under-age tobacco sales. Advocates promised teen smoking would fall sharply when it became harder to buy cigarettes.

The result, according to a two-year study by medical school researchers, it is a failure. Strict enforcement of minimum-age laws did make it so fewer stores sold tobacco to minors. But surveys of high school students in those same communities revealed no effect on the ability of teens to get tobacco products and no reduction in the prevalence of smoking. In

fact, there was an increase in teenage smoking compared with nearby communities that hadn't cracked down.

All this just comes to show that making the legal age higher will just create a black market for it and kids in high school who are buying these tobacco products are already receiving it illegally.

This also shows hypocrisy in the sense that once you turn 18, you are a legal adult and are fully accountable for your decisions. You can vote, work, get married, and serve in the military, but drinking and smoking are illegal? To me, this doesn't make much sense.

In fact, if the drinking age and smoking age are a milestone that people obtain at 18, it would create a controlled environment for these habits instead of at hostile conditions like at parties. And let's face it, no one really waits until 21. A 2011 study by The Partnership at Drugfree.org showed that the average age at which teens had their first drink was 14.

People do argue that having the drinking age at 18 would cause a spike in underage drinking because it would making alcohol consumption "less of a big deal" because of its accessibility. However, thinking of it as "less of a big deal" can be a good thing. That means alcohol would have lost its mysterious appeal.

The same idea with tobacco products, it would be "more mysterious." It would create a greater appeal to teens because of its illegality.

With this change in law, the U.S. would mirror other countries. According to International Center for Alcohol Policies, the U.S. is one of a small number of countries to have a minimum drinking age of 21; almost all the rest have drinking ages ranging from 16 to 20.

At 18, we deserve the right truly to be full-fledged adults

and make our own decisions. Whether it is drinking or smoking, we should be able to choose what we do with our bodies, internally and externally. We do not need the law to baby us any longer.