



# How Alternatives to Suspension Make a Positive Difference for Rhode Island Students who Use Tobacco and Nicotine Products

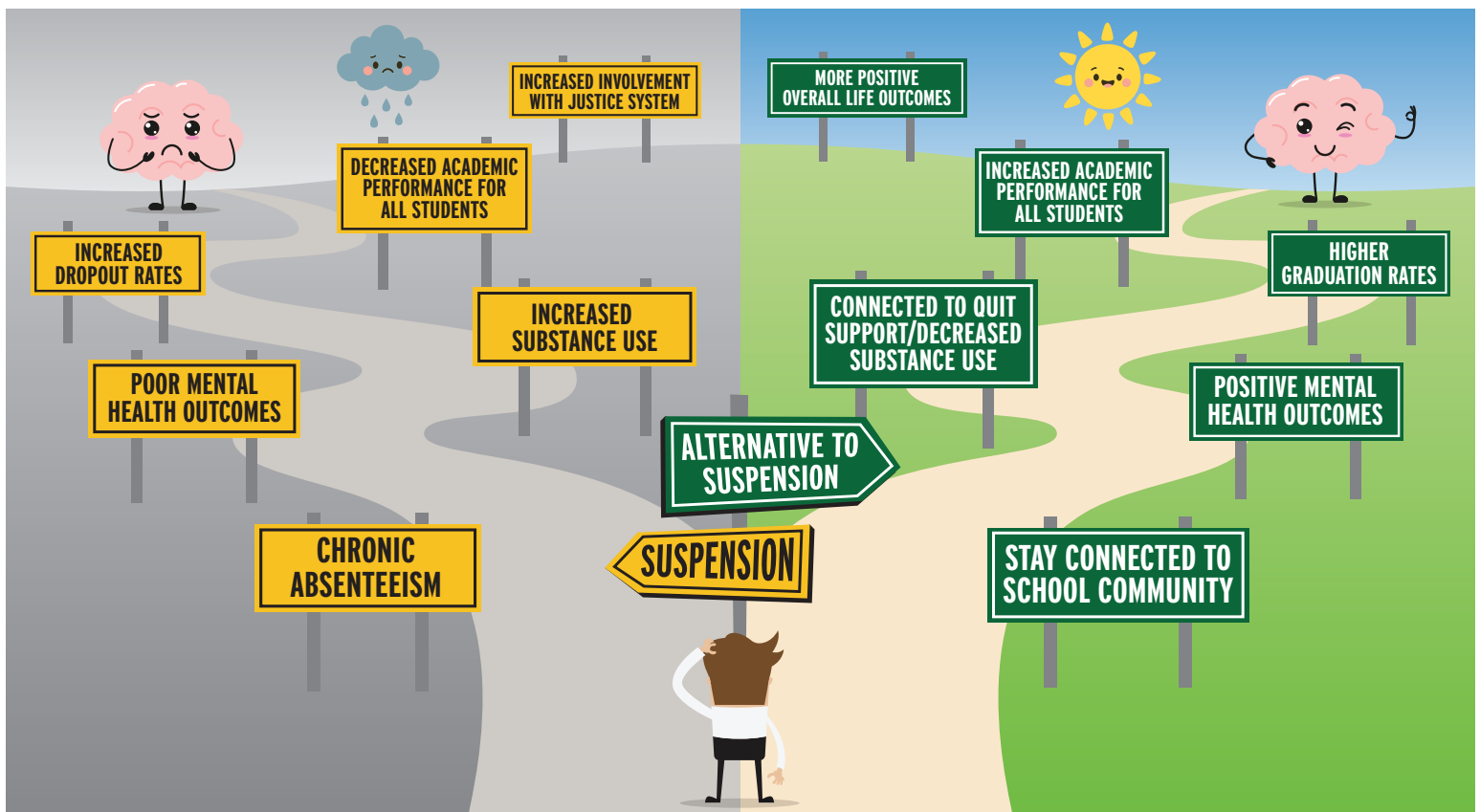
## What are Alternatives to Suspension?

Rhode Island students struggling with substance use, behavior, and mental health challenges need support, not punishment, from their schools. Exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, are strongly linked to negative outcomes related to mental health and academic performance. **Alternatives to suspension**, such as educational programs and services that connect students to supportive resources, are linked to more positive health outcomes.<sup>1-8, 11</sup>

*In 2023, about **one in six** (16.5%) Rhode Island high school youth and about **one in fifteen** (6.7%) middle school youth reported current e-cigarette use.<sup>11</sup>*

## Why are Alternatives to Suspension Beneficial to Rhode Island Students?

The Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) Tobacco Control Program recommends alternatives to suspension for students who use tobacco and nicotine products at school. School suspensions increase student risk of using tobacco and other substances.<sup>10</sup> Evidence-based alternative-to-suspension programs keep students in a connected, supportive school environment and provide behavioral interventions designed to prevent recurrence of tobacco and nicotine use. These programs help students develop healthy coping mechanisms, build relationships, and learn in an environment that encourages positive behavior change. Schools that implement alternative-to-suspension programs may observe increased academic achievement and improvements to school climate.<sup>1-4, 7, 8</sup>



*Schools have an important choice to make in how to respond to students vaping on campus.*



*National organizations that encourage alternatives to suspension include the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Center for School Engagement, and the Public Health Law Center.*



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**8.8%** Percentage of suspensions attributed to substance use in the 2024-2025 school year.<sup>9</sup> That is **1,410** students that would be better served by alternatives to suspension.



Suspension and/or Expulsion: <sup>1-8</sup>

**VS**

Alternatives to Suspension: <sup>4, 7, 8</sup>



Correlated with greater tobacco use	Supportive of quitting tobacco use through education
Increased risk of additional substance use	Decreases risk of additional substance use
Decreased schoolwide academic achievement and standardized test scores	Increased schoolwide academic achievement for all students; improves overall school climate
Increased chronic absenteeism	Decreased chronic absenteeism; keeps students engaged in academics and connected to school community
Correlated with continued negative behavior	Supportive of positive behavior change

*In a pilot study done in Washington County, Rhode Island, after completing an evidence-based alternative-to-suspension program, **72%** of students indicated high or very high motivation to quit compared to **53%** before the intervention.<sup>12</sup>*

Alternative-to-suspension programs prioritize health education, counseling, and behavioral support. They help students understand the risks of vaping while keeping them connected to their learning environment. Because the programs address the root cause of the behavior, alternatives to suspension offer a more effective, educational, and restorative approach to substance use infractions in schools. Alternative-to-suspension programs reduce repeat offenses and improve overall school climate. By choosing restorative practices over exclusionary discipline, schools can foster accountability, support student wellness, and create safer, more inclusive learning communities.

## How Can Schools Implement Alternatives to Suspension?

Implementing an alternative-to-suspension program may be easier than it seems! Some Rhode Island schools are already using this program:



[Healthy Futures](#) is a free evidence-based program created by the Stanford Medicine REACH Lab that helps students learn about nicotine dependence and find healthier alternatives to vaping. The program, which can address both nicotine use and cannabis use, includes online self-paced lessons for students to complete and two longer facilitator-led variations that can be used to address repeat infractions. Additionally, educators and school administrators receive free access to a data dashboard to track their school or district's progress.

## What Else Can Schools Do to Create a Tobacco-Free Campus?

Alternatives to suspension are one of many strategies that schools can implement to create tobacco-free campuses. For more information and resources on this topic, please visit the Tobacco Control Program's [Tobacco Information for Educators](#).



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## References

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