

San Francisco Chronicle 2.14.18 Jill Tucker, Education Reporter
SF students' edible marijuana scare underscores parents' fears over legalization

10 SF students got sick from consuming cannabis, District says

Alana Herron panicked when she received an email from her daughter saying that “something bad is happening” at James Lick Middle School in San Francisco. At least 10 students had ingested what was later determined to be marijuana in edible form, and one of the children was rushed to a hospital in critical condition. While the students’ intoxication on Tuesday afternoon wasn’t life-threatening, and though all were recovering Wednesday, the incident was “very scary,” Herron said. “It seemed to traumatize a lot of the kids.”

After the initial fears subsided, the San Francisco mom and other parents were left with a stark realization: With the recreational marijuana sales to adults upping the accessibility of baked cannabis confections and candy, it could easily happen again.

“This is not a problem tied to James Lick,” said parent Mike Johnson, whose oldest daughter attends the Noe Valley middle school. “To my mind, what happened is like a portent of what’s going to happen more and more in schools in California and other states that are making marijuana more accessible.”

Many school officials across California share the same worry, and say they’ve responded by ramping up education efforts to combat the intentional or accidental ingestion of cannabis. One particular fear is that some potent products resemble typical school snacks — marijuana-infused cookies, chocolate bars, cinnamon mints, even chewy gummies.

“Aren’t there vitamins like that?” Herron asked. “It does seem to be more out of control and maybe more confusing for kids. San Francisco district officials didn’t identify the kind of edible the students ate, only saying that a package marked “medical cannabis” was confiscated. It’s unclear how much they ate or where the product came from. People who ingest edible marijuana products may not feel the effects for an hour or more. State law allows for more of the psychoactive chemical THC to be included in medicinal cannabis products than recreational items.

To address the new consumer market for marijuana, San Francisco Unified has been prioritizing drug education and, specifically, the risks of cannabis, said school board President Hydra Mendoza. “This terrible incident is a reminder that we need to not only educate our students appropriately — and SFUSD will make this a priority — but also those who make these products accessible to our youth under 21,” Mendoza said.

A week before the James Lick incident, the state Department of Education announced the creation of an online portal with resources and information about Proposition 64, which

California voters passed in 2016 to legalize, regulate and tax recreational marijuana. “This is an excellent time to remind parents, students, educators, administrators and the public about the detrimental effects of marijuana, especially to the developing brains of children,” said state schools Superintendent Tom Torlakson. **“In this new environment, we need to be even more vigilant in making certain school-aged children understand the importance of making healthy decisions.”**

Across the country, youth marijuana use has been on the decline in recent years, with just over 7 percent of teenagers reporting that they had used the drug in the previous month, according to federal surveys from 2015 and 2016. In California, about 5 percent of seventh-graders reported using marijuana in the previous 30 days, a 2015 state study found.

In San Francisco, school officials say the city has seen a drop in the prevalence of marijuana use among middle schoolers, with 3.9 percent of students reporting they had ever used cannabis in surveys last year, down from 7.7 percent a decade earlier. Last year, one-quarter of high school students in the city reported having ever used marijuana. Across the state, schoolchildren have been getting substance-abuse-prevention education for years, starting in kindergarten with age-appropriate curriculum, said Erica Lingrell, program administrator for San Francisco Unifier’s School Health Programs.

That includes information about marijuana. But in recent years, the culture has shifted from educating students about an illicit drug to negotiating a product advertised on billboards and the sides of buses. In San Francisco schools, students who help educate their peers about substance abuse have been asking a lot more about marijuana this year, Lingrell said. They want more information, more tools to address questions and concerns.

“They’re asking questions because the community in San Francisco is talking about it,” she said. Dan Orenstein, a post-doctoral fellow at UCSF who has researched the effectiveness of cannabis regulation, **said both children and adults will be safer if marijuana products are clearly labeled and if manufacturers and retailers are restricted from using catchy brand marketing.** “There’s a great variety of products here that are new to a lot of people,” Orenstein said. “Especially because these products are new to the commercial market, it’s really important to have clear labeling.”

A marijuana-laced cookie, for example, could have 20 mg of THC or 100 mg, he said. “People perceive (edibles) as less risky or less harmful or even harmless,” he said. **“We should be very clear about how these are packaged and labeled for what you’re buying. This is a drug.”**

The incident at James Lick exemplifies the concerns public officials have had with the mainstreaming of marijuana and specifically edible products, said San Francisco Supervisor Jeff Sheehy. “They look like candy to kids,” he added. “People who are consuming cannabis for adult use should be very, very careful about making sure this doesn’t end up in the hands of young people.”