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Kafer: Stop with the glorification of marijuana — young Coloradans are listening

The state of Colorado's 4/20 license plate auction endorses cannabis use

By KRISTA KAFER | Columnist for The Denver Post

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“Do you know what today is?” a 13-year-old blurted out during science class. “It’s 4/20 and you know what that means.” Several boys nodded and chuckled. “Yeah, THC is cool,” said another student. When I suggested otherwise, a student remarked, “It’s better than drinking.”

Glad to hear children today have internalized the marijuana industry’s marketing material because that’s exactly what impressionable and vulnerable 8th graders need — the glorification of cannabis. So kudos to the Colorado state government for amplifying the “THC is cool” message last week.

These boys could be on their way to a solid habit in no time. The average age of the first toke in Colorado is 14 years old. According to the 2019 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, 11% of 12- and 13-year-olds and 20% of kids over 14 had tried marijuana. The survey found usage was higher among urban, minority youth.

Some kids will smoke a few times and move on, but others will become habitual users. Chronic use during the teen years could be associated with reduced IQ in adulthood, a loss of as much as eight IQ points was noted [in a study published in 2012 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#). Adolescent use of marijuana has also been [linked to psychiatric issues including increased depression and anxiety](#). I suspect, given the still limited research on the effects of long-term habitual marijuana use among teens, that if you drew a Venn diagram of high achieving college or career-bound high school graduates and habitual teen pot users and there wouldn’t be much of an overlap.

Next time you drive past a pot shop with a line out front, check who’s in the queue. Sure, there are otherwise sober weekend pot smokers but they’re not the ones waiting for the store to open on a subzero February morning. Data back this up: adult marijuana use is more common among lower-income men with poor educational attainment, according to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

Marijuana doesn't just impact the brain; the smoke harms the respiratory system of users and bystanders through secondhand smoke. Unfortunately, like the students in my class, far too many kids perceive frequent marijuana use as no big deal. Only 61% of students 14 and older in the Healthy Kids Survey believe people who use marijuana regularly face a moderate or great risk of harm.

In addition to the impact on the mental and physical health of teens and adults, the marijuana industry has a negative effect on the health of the environment. A Colorado State University study found that indoor marijuana grows account for 1.3% of the state's total greenhouse gas emissions, a share similar to that of coal mining (1.8%).

Do the economic and tax revenue benefits of the marijuana trade outweigh the health and environmental costs? Hard to say. Is there value to letting adults determine what they want to consume? Perhaps. Either way, marijuana is legal in Colorado and there's no putting that genie back in the bottle.

But just because something is legal doesn't mean it should be lauded. That's just what the state government did this week. On April 20, the state auctioned off 14 marijuana-themed license plates with words like BONG, GANJA, and STASH. The highest bid, no pun intended, went to ISIT420. Money raised will contribute to programs that support Coloradans with disabilities, an admirable goal and no doubt the reason why the governor applauded the auction.

But should the state government really be celebrating drug use? If we're going to promote marijuana consumption on license plates let's put the state's imprimatur on other habits like cigarette smoking, chewing tobacco, and getting drunk.

Those IMWASTED, NICFIT, and CIGSMOKR plates could raise even more money for good causes and give people a few laughs while stuck in traffic. Like ISIT420 and BONG, they're just the sort of fun message young people need to see on official state property to reinforce the notion that drug use has no real consequences.

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Colorado Disability Funding Committee
A Colorado license "ISIT420" is one of several up for auction through the Colorado Disability Funding Committee. The public auction runs through April 20. As of Tuesday morning, the highest bid for this plate is \$6,440.

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