

## Letter to the Editor: Marijuana Lessons From Colorado (500 words)

On January 1, Colorado opened its doors to this nation's first legal sale of recreational marijuana. Lost in the buzz is the documented impact of legal marijuana on Colorado children.

The reality about today's marijuana, an addictive substance whose average potency has dramatically increased from 3% THC in the 1990s to almost 15%, should change everything that people think they know about the drug. It affects the brain – especially in adolescents –impairing intelligence, reasoning, judgment and clarity of thought. Legalization means greater access and a lower perception of the drug's risks by teens, leading more kids to use and hijacking their potential success in school and in life.

Instead of following Colorado's lead, perhaps we need to cool our heels and watch carefully what's happening. Having implemented medical marijuana in 2000, Colorado has 13 years of data we can examine.

Past 30-day use of marijuana by teens 12 to 17 is highest in medical marijuana states. In Denver between 2004 and 2010, past 30-day users of marijuana ages 12 and up increased 4.3% while the increase for the nation was 0.05%. By 2010, past 30-day use for this age group was 12.2% compared to 6.6% for the country. One in six kids who start using marijuana becomes addicted.

On December 19, 2013, Dr. Christian Thurstone, Colorado Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Society President and youth addiction researcher at the University of Colorado-Denver, observed that his clinic has been “inundated with young people reporting for marijuana-addiction treatment. . . . Every day, we see the acute effects of the policy of legalization. And our kids are paying a great price.”

In Colorado's schools drug-related expulsions spiked 45% between 2008 and 2012. In a single academic year a 10-year low in drug related suspensions/expulsions flipped to a 10-year high. While the Colorado Department of Education includes all drugs in its data set, officials report that most drug-related suspensions since the 08/09 academic year are related to marijuana.

Sadly for Colorado residents, marijuana-impaired drivers and fatalities are on the rise. While overall traffic fatalities decreased 16 percent between 2006 and 2011, during these same six years, traffic fatalities with drivers testing positive for just marijuana increased 114%.

What can Arizona learn from this? Lesson number one: we should not rush to experiment with an entire generation of our young people by legalizing marijuana. Use of marijuana by Arizona's 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders has already increased by 14.4% from 2008 to 2012.

Lesson number two: we must build an environment in which every child can learn and thrive; that must include funding public education to heighten awareness about the harms of marijuana. Every child can succeed when adults believe in them and create safe communities for them. Marijuana is never part of that equation.