



YOUTH TOBACCO USE AND ATTITUDES

SPECIAL REPORT

2025-2026



**MESA COUNTY
PUBLIC HEALTH**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tobacco use remains one of the leading preventable causes of disease and premature death in the United States. While cigarette smoking has declined substantially over the last several decades, tobacco and nicotine products continue to pose serious health risks. The rapid rise of electronic vapor products has altered the landscape of tobacco use, introducing new challenges for prevention, education, and public health messaging.

In Mesa County, youth tobacco use has declined sharply in recent years, reflecting the success of sustained prevention and education efforts. In 2023, only 8% of high school students reported current use of any tobacco product, down more than 70% since 2019.

Despite this progress, **vaping remains the most common form of tobacco use among youth**. Early initiation, social access, and mental health stressors remain key drivers of use, underscoring the need for prevention strategies that address both individual behavior and the environments shaping youth decision-making.

DEFINITIONS

Tobacco product: Any product that contains nicotine or tobacco or is derived from tobacco and is intended to be ingested, inhaled, or applied to the skin. Includes cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, and electronic vapor products.

Electronic vapor product or vaping: A non-combustible product containing nicotine that heats a solution via a battery or circuit, including e-cigarettes and vape pens.

Students: Refers to high school students. Student data is from the **Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS)**, administered every two years.

AGE & EARLY INITIATION

About **1 in 8** Mesa County high school students report trying a tobacco product before age 13. Early tobacco use increases the likelihood of continued use in adolescence and future high-risk substance use.

ATTITUDES & SOCIAL NORMS

Most youth believe vaping is wrong and harmful, reflecting the success of consistent public health messaging. **Personal conviction** is a powerful protective factor, even in the presence of peer influence.



ACCESS & ENVIRONMENT

Access typically occurs through social sources –peers, family, or **social media**. Family environments are a risk factor when nicotine is accessible at home and a protective factor when clear expectations and support are available.

MENTAL HEALTH & STRESS

Students experiencing stress, anxiety, or emotional distress are **2-3x** more likely to report current use. This highlights the importance of prevention strategies that support youth mental wellbeing alongside substance use prevention.

TOBACCO USE AND EXPOSURE

Over the past decade, **youth tobacco use has changed dramatically** - first shifting away from traditional cigarette smoking to newer products like electronic vapor devices, and more recently declining across the board. These trends are pronounced in Mesa County, as well as across Colorado and the United States.

TRENDS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

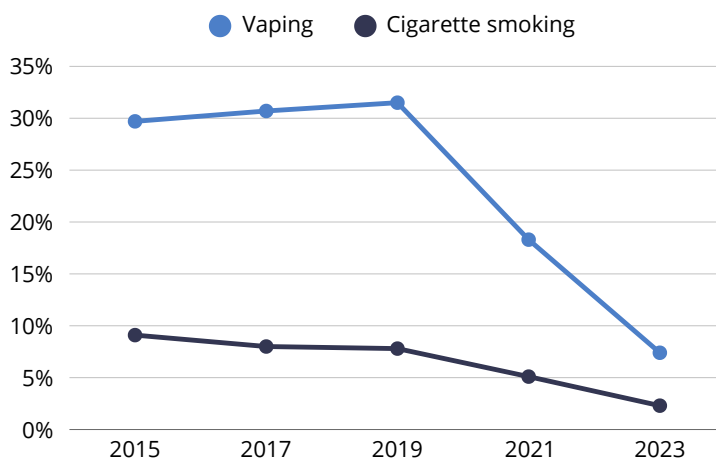
Student tobacco use is **down over 70%** since 2019.

In 2023, only **8%** of Mesa County high school students reported using any kind of tobacco product, similar to the statewide rate of 9%. In Mesa County, this represents a more than **70% decrease** since 2019, when 1 in 3 students reported current use.

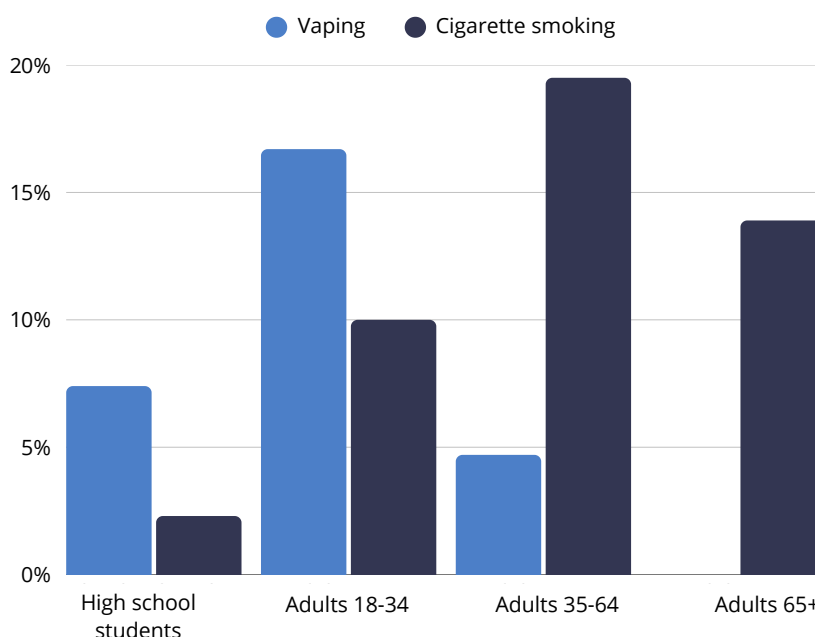
While tobacco use overall has dropped sharply, vaping remains the leading form of tobacco use among youth.

High school students are **3x more likely to vape than they are to smoke cigarettes**. By contrast, cigarettes are still the most commonly used tobacco product among adults.

Tobacco product use among Mesa County high school students (2015-2023)



Tobacco product use by age, Mesa County (2023)



Sources: Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, 2023 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2021-2023

EARLY USE

Early initiation remains a key concern. In 2023, 7% of Mesa County high school students had tried smoking cigarettes before age 13, and 11% had tried vaping. Combined, 13% of students had first tried some kind of tobacco product before age 13, about the same as the state average.

Early use strongly predicts continued use. 38% of those who started early were still using tobacco in high school, compared to only 4% of those who started later. Early exposure to nicotine increases the likelihood of long-term addiction and later use of other substances, highlighting the importance of early prevention efforts.

13%

of Mesa County students try tobacco products before age 13.

SECONDHAND EXPOSURE

Exposure to secondhand smoke or vapor also poses a health risk for the youth in Mesa County. In 2023, 1 in 5 students (20%) reported recent exposure to secondhand smoke or vapor in their homes. This underscores the importance of **family-focused education** and intervention strategies.

1 in 5

students are exposed to secondhand smoke or vapor at home.

QUIT ATTEMPTS

Encouragingly, many students who currently use tobacco are motivated to quit. Among the 8% who reported current tobacco use, half reported at least one attempt to quit in the past year. This suggests that many **recognize the risks and want to stop.**

This represents an opportunity for schools, healthcare providers, and community programs to connect students with youth-friendly cessation support.

50%

reported at least one attempt to quit in the past year.

ATTITUDES ON TOBACCO USE

Tobacco prevention is one of public health's greatest success stories. Through decades of education and advocacy, social norms around cigarette smoking have shifted dramatically. However, as traditional smoking has declined, the rapid rise of vaping devices has introduced new challenges for prevention and public health messaging.

In 2018, Colorado youth were vaping at twice the national average, and many did not believe it was risky for their health. In response, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment launched a statewide campaign to help parents, schools, and communities talk with youth about vaping and to dispel the myth that it is safe.

Since then, **youth attitudes and behaviors have changed dramatically**. The rapid rise in youth vaping has reversed, and students now report much stronger beliefs about the risks of vaping.

YOUTH ATTITUDES

The percentage of Mesa County high school students who said vaping at their age was wrong increased from 60% in 2019 to 82% in 2023. Likewise, 83% said they believe that daily vaping poses a risk of harm, compared to 65% in 2019. These shifts in perception **mirror statewide trends**, reflecting the value of education and consistent public messaging.

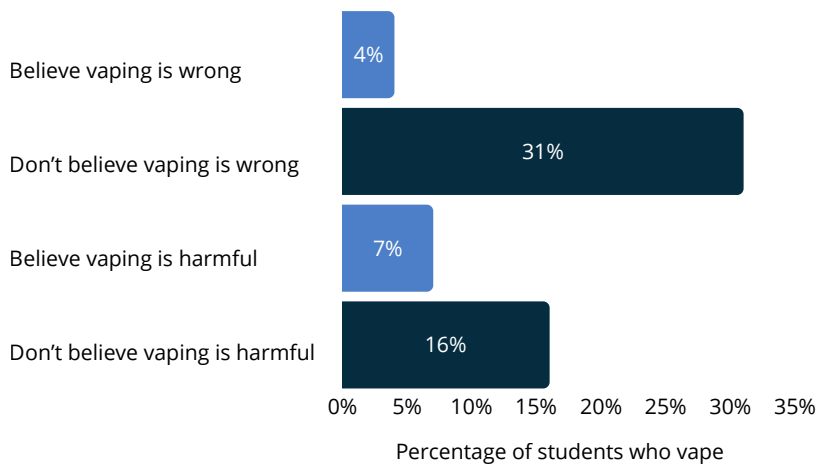
Students who said vaping at their age is wrong



Students who believe that daily vaping poses a risk of harm



Student vaping prevalence by vaping beliefs



Source: Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, 2023

Personal conviction and understanding the risks help build resilience among youth against tobacco use. Students who see vaping as wrong or harmful are far less likely to vape. Only 4% of students who believe vaping is wrong currently vape, compared to 31% of those who do not. Also, only 7% of students who believe daily vaping is harmful currently vape, compared to 16% of those who do not.

PEER INFLUENCE

Peer influence remains a factor, but personal attitudes also make a difference. Among students who do not currently vape, 6% said they would if their best friend offered it to them.

The strongest predictor of whether they would accept that offer was **personal conviction of right and wrong**. 21% of students who don't think vaping is wrong said they'd vape if a friend offered, compared to only 3% of those who believe it's wrong.

TOP THREE REASONS STUDENTS TRY VAPING



Friend or family members vapes



Availability of flavors



Easier to access than other tobacco products

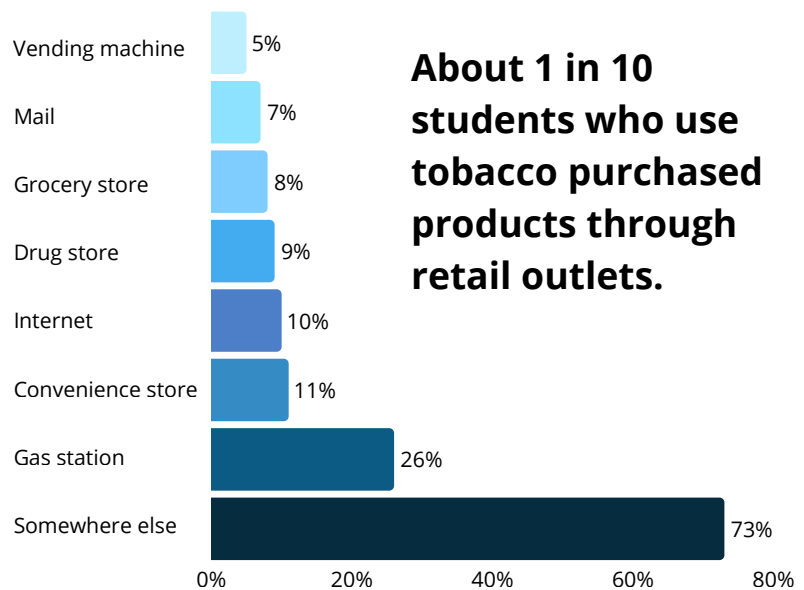
MEANS OF ACCESS

Access is another key priority in prevention strategies. Nearly half of Mesa County students (45%) said vapor products are easy to access. Access strongly predicts use: 17% of those with easy access were currently vaping, compared to only 2% of those without. **Among students currently using tobacco products, 59% had not purchased their own products.** Of those who did, most obtained them through informal or social sources rather than directly from retail outlets, such as gas stations, convenience stores, grocery stores, and drug stores.

While fewer youth report purchasing tobacco products directly from retail locations, retail availability still influences youth access by increasing the overall supply of nicotine products circulating among friends and within families.

About 1 in 10 students who reported current tobacco use purchased tobacco products through retail outlets. Strategies that strengthen retail oversight may help reduce both direct purchases by youth and downstream sharing within youth social networks.

Locations where students have purchased tobacco products



About 1 in 10 students who use tobacco purchased products through retail outlets.

Source: Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, 2023

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Risk and protective factors play vital roles in shaping youth health and behavior. While protective factors reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes, **risk factors** increase vulnerability and can make it more difficult for youth to make healthy choices. **Protective factors** like family support and opportunities for social connection help youth build resilience and avoid harmful behaviors.

Understanding these factors can help explain why some young people are more likely to try tobacco or other substances, and where prevention efforts can have the greatest impact.

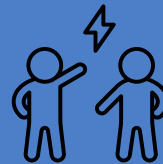
RISK FACTORS

Characteristics that **increase** the likelihood of negative outcomes.

Examples include:



Low-self esteem



Family conflict



Poverty

Examples include:

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

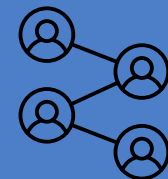
Characteristics that **decrease** the likelihood of negative outcomes.



Emotional self-regulation



Supportive relationships



Social connections

Source: [CDC Youth Risk and Protective Factors](#)

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR YOUTH TOBACCO USE

Mesa County high school students who participated in the 2023 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey not only shared insights about their health behaviors like substance use, but also about the relationships and experiences that shape their wellbeing.

Their responses show a clear pattern: youth with strong protective factors are far less likely to use tobacco, while youth facing significant stressors are much more likely to report current use.

Across multiple areas, including family support, economic stability, social connection, and mental health, students with stronger protective factors consistently report exceedingly low rates of tobacco use, **while those experiencing risk factors report rates 2-3x higher**. Incorporating prevention strategies that address upstream conditions will likely achieve more lasting reductions in youth tobacco use than through downstream interventions alone.

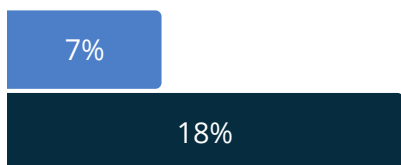
Tobacco use lower among students with protective factors

Percentage of Mesa County students reporting current tobacco use



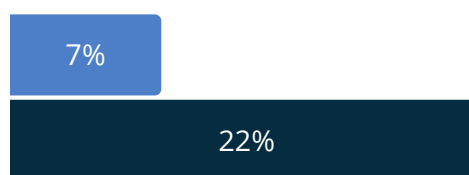
Family Support

Ability to ask a parent for help



Economic Stability

Access to enough food



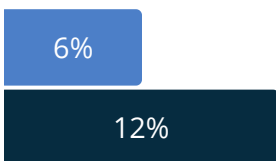
● Yes

● No



Social Connection

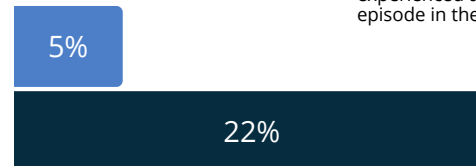
Participation in extracurriculars



Mental Health

Healthy emotional well-being

*Defined as not having experienced a depressive episode in the past year



Source: Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, 2023

TOBACCO USE AS A RISK FACTOR

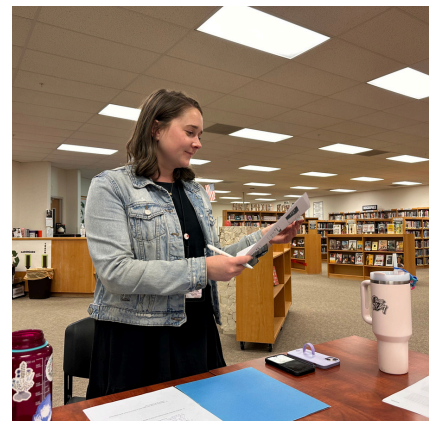
Early initiation of tobacco use, as well as early use of alcohol or marijuana, is one of the strongest predictors of high-risk substance use later on. This reinforces the importance of delaying first use, strengthening protective factors, and engaging families and schools in early prevention.

In 2023, 1 in 5 Mesa County high school students (21%) reported having tried tobacco, alcohol, or marijuana before age 13. Students who started early were **4x more likely to report high-risk substance use** in high school, including prescription drug misuse or use of illicit drugs.

FOCUS GROUP INSIGHTS

To better understand the context behind trends in youth tobacco use, Mesa County Public Health convened a series of one-hour focus groups with local youth and adults in September of 2025. These conversations explored how tobacco and nicotine are viewed in the community, why some young people start using these products, and how they typically access them.

Focus group findings aligned with local and statewide data, highlighting the importance of risk and protective factors. While youth and adults sometimes approached the issue from different perspectives, there was strong agreement around several core drivers of youth tobacco use.



Community Health Planner Supervisor
Darcy Weir leading youth focus group

KEY THEMES

SOCIAL NORMS SET THE TONE

Youth see vaping “everywhere,” particularly among peers and at home, yet find it **unhealthy and “disgusting.”** This reflects shifting attitudes reinforced by recent education and prevention efforts.

FAMILY ENVIRONMENT MATTERS

Accessible nicotine at home lowers perception of risk and barriers to experimentation, while **family communication and clear boundaries** are described as important protective factors.

STRESS DRIVES VULNERABILITY

Youth connected nicotine use to stress, anxiety, and the pressure to fit in. Some described vaping as a coping tool offering short-term relief but ultimately **worsening anxiety over time.**

ACCESS IS PRIMARILY SOCIAL

Participants said youth mainly access nicotine via social channels – **parents, siblings, friends, and social media.** However, retail availability still influences nicotine product circulation.

These insights underscore that reducing youth tobacco use depends on more than individual choice alone. Addressing social norms, strengthening family protective factors, supporting youth mental health, and reducing social access are key to preventing early initiation.

CURRENT TOBACCO POLICY

TOBACCO TAX LANDSCAPE

Tobacco products in Colorado are subject to a **2.9% sales tax**. Additionally, Colorado voters approved Proposition EE (2020), which established incremental tax increases for cigarettes, tobacco products, and nicotine products through July 1, 2027. Currently, cigarettes are taxed at \$2.24 per pack of 20 (11.2 ¢ per cigarette), while nicotine and other tobacco products are taxed at **56% of the manufacturer's list price**.

TOBACCO RETAIL LICENSES

Tobacco retail licensing (TRL) is a policy that requires tobacco retailers to obtain a license to sell any tobacco and nicotine products and comply with all tobacco laws. In 2020, the Colorado Legislature enacted a statewide tobacco retail license to tackle youth access to tobacco and nicotine products. To enforce the TRL, the state conducts regular compliance checks on all retailers to ensure they are not selling to underage individuals or violating tobacco laws.

Recently, cities and counties across Colorado have adopted their own local tobacco retail licenses to strengthen statewide regulations by increasing accountability and enforcement at the community level. In all, there are **41 communities across Colorado with local TRLs**.

FLAVOR BANS

Flavored tobacco bans are regulations that prohibit the sale of flavored tobacco products, such as e-cigarettes, cigars, and menthol cigarettes. These regulations aim to reduce the appeal of such products to young people. Currently, **11 communities across Colorado have implemented flavor bans**.

“Mom’s vape tastes like blueberry.”

Quote from a Mesa County student. Flavored products are one of the top 3 reasons youth start vaping.



CLEAN AIR AND SMOKE-FREE POLICIES

The Colorado Clean Indoor Air Act (CCIAA) protects Coloradans from the dangers associated with secondhand smoke and vapor exposure. The CCIAA prohibits smoking or vaping any substance in most indoor public spaces and workplaces, including restaurants, bars, retail establishments, healthcare facilities, public transportation, and common areas of assisted living facilities. Smoking and vaping are also prohibited **within 25 feet of building entrances**.

Youth are further protected from tobacco and nicotine use through the **Colorado Tobacco Free Schools law**, which prohibits tobacco and nicotine use on school grounds.

Beyond state law, some communities have adopted additional protections. Both **Fruita and Grand Junction** have smoke and vapor-free parks policies, and Grand Junction also prohibits smoking and vaping in transit waiting areas.



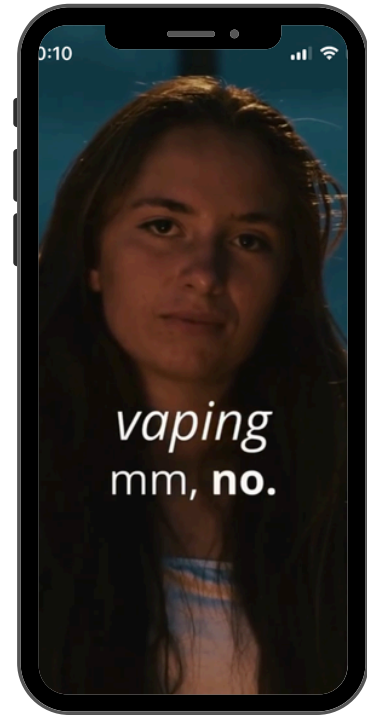
Long Family Memorial Park, Grand Junction, Colorado

LOCAL INITIATIVES

YOUTH PREVENTION AND EDUCATION

In addition to researching and informing local efforts aimed at reducing youth tobacco use and exposure, Mesa County Public Health (MCPH) collaborates with parents, schools, and youth to provide education, raise awareness, and shift social norms.

MCPH partners with youth organizations and local student organizations to deliver peer-led presentations on the health risks of using tobacco and nicotine products.



MCPH anti-vaping video campaign, 2025

PARENT EDUCATION

MCPH partners with Mesa County Valley School District 51 to provide parents with **education and resources** about tobacco and nicotine products, health risks associated with using those products, and information on how to talk with young people about making healthy choices.

COMMUNITY AWARENESS

MCPH collaborates with **local community coalitions**, such as the Mesa County Opioid Response Group and the Clifton Transformation Group, to expand outreach, align messaging, and increase public awareness of the impact of youth tobacco use.

YOUTH FOCUSED ANTI-VAPING CAMPAIGN

MCPH also collaborated with local high school students to create a video campaign highlighting the real reasons their peers choose not to vape, using **positive peer influence** to shift norms and encourage healthier choices among youth.

RESOURCES

COLORADO QUITLINE

The QuitLine is a free tobacco cessation program available for Colorado residents. It has helped more than 1.5 million people quit tobacco and nicotine. QuitLine provides access to professional quit coaches, a supportive online community, and nicotine replacement products.

- Coloradoquits.com (English) or 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669)
- Coloradoquits.com/es (Spanish) or 1-855-DEJELO-YA (1-855-335-3569)



MY LIFE MY QUIT

My Life My Quit is a free and confidential program for youth under 18 to help them quit smoking or vaping.

- Co.mylifemyquit.org or text "Start My Quit" to 36072



EX PROGRAM

The Ex Program is a collaboration between the Truth Initiative and the Mayo Clinic, designed to guide individuals through their quitting journey. The Ex Program offers free access to a personalized and flexible program designed to help individuals change their habits, find support, and explore options for nicotine replacement therapy.

- join.exprogram.com



BABY & ME TOBACCO FREE

Baby & Me Tobacco Free offers free personalized counseling for pregnant women, including 4 sessions during pregnancy and up to 6 sessions after the baby is born.

- babyandmetobaccofree.org



REFERENCES

[Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, Data Request, 2015-2023.](#)

[Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, Data Request, 2021-2023.](#)

[Surgeon General's Report: Eliminating Tobacco-Related Disease and Death: Addressing Disparities, 2024.](#)

[Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Colorado youth vaping nicotine at twice the national average, Press release, 2018.](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Risk and Protective Factors, 2024.](#)

[Tax.colorado.gov](https://tax.colorado.gov)

[Colorado Laws Related to Tobacco Sales to Minors \(C.R.S. 44-7-104.5\)](#)

[Colorado Clean Indoor Air Act \(C.R.S. 25-14\)](#)

[Tobacco Free Schools Law \(C.R.S. 25-14-103.5\)](#)

[Grand Junction Municipal Code \(8.20.020\)](#)

[Fruita Municipal Code \(9.03.005\)](#)

[Tobacco Free CO](#)



YOUTH TOBACCO USE AND ATTITUDES

SPECIAL REPORT 2025-2026



**MESA COUNTY
PUBLIC HEALTH**

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS

School District 51

MarillacHealth

Warrior Wellness Center at Central High School

Grand Junction Housing Authority

Mesa County Opioid Response Group