



March 10, 2021

The Honorable Delores Kelley
Senate Finance Committee Chair

The Honorable Brian Feldman
Senate Finance Committee Vice-Chair

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice-Chair Feldman and Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

As the 10th U.S Secretary of Education under President Barack Obama, a former teacher, and the founder of Strong Future Maryland, a progressive organization fighting for a more equitable, just, and prosperous Maryland, I understand the urgent need to tackle decades and centuries-old systems and policies that harm our children and perpetuate injustice.

We must break the cycle of inaction and hold our systems accountable for failing our most vulnerable residents. That means being brave enough to ignore special interests and tackle the long-term structural change that will give our children the future they deserve. I firmly believe that SB 177 & HB 134, legislation under consideration by the General Assembly that removes all flavored tobacco products from the market, will help us do just that.

As our nation fights a respiratory pandemic, we must do everything in our power to protect people's lungs. Ending the sale of flavored tobacco products in Maryland will help to reduce the number of people who die – 7,500 in Maryland each year – or suffer debilitating illness from tobacco use in Maryland each year, significantly reduce the number of young people who become addicted to tobacco products, and begin to reverse the youth e-cigarette epidemic.

Nationally, nearly [3.6 million kids](#) are using e-cigarettes. In Maryland, a staggering [23%](#) of our high school students use electronic smoking devices, which come in thousands of kid-friendly flavors. Electronic smoking devices deliver massive doses of nicotine, a highly addictive drug. The U.S. Surgeon General has concluded that youth use of tobacco in any form, including e-cigarettes, is unsafe, causes addiction, and can harm adolescent brain development, which impacts attention, memory, impulse control, mood, and learning. Nicotine can also increase their chance of addiction to other dangerous substances, and put them at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

Despite the known dangers of tobacco usage, especially in young people, the federal government has failed to protect kids from flavored tobacco. Their narrowly drafted policies only restrict some types of electronic smoking devices, leaving countless flavored tobacco products – including menthol cigarettes – widely available for use by kids.

The removal of menthol-flavored products from the market is also a critical component of this legislation. No other flavored product contributes more to the death and disease caused by tobacco use than menthol cigarettes. The menthol in cigarettes disguises the harsh flavor of tobacco, making it attractive for beginners who are experimenting and increasing the likelihood of addiction. About [50 percent](#) of youth who smoke cigarettes start with and then use menthol cigarettes.

The scientific research shows that menthol is not only a starting point for youth, but that these products disproportionately affect the Black community, and not by accident. Direct marketing to the Black community is why tobacco use is the [No. 1 preventable](#) cause of death for Black Americans.

We know for a fact that tobacco kills its users, harms our children, and causes troubling health disparities related to race and socioeconomic status. The question is, what is Maryland willing to do to rein in Big Tobacco and change this?

I know you care deeply for our youth. As a longtime champion of their health, I hope you will join me in supporting this important legislation and pass a clean bill ending the sale of *all* flavored tobacco products – including menthol cigarettes.

We can't change past actions that have brought us to this troubling point in our state's history, but you can help change the future for our children and give all Maryland residents an equal opportunity at good health and prosperity.

Best,

Dr. John B. King Jr.
10th U.S. Secretary of Education (Obama Administration)
Founder, Strong Future Maryland