

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 59: Youth Learning and Leading for a Healthier Future

July 31, 2026

Summary: Though school is out for summer, the learning hasn't stopped for some Oklahoma kids and teens interested in health and healthcare. From the Youth Action for Health Leadership (YAHL) Summit in June to the Youth Medical Summits in July – followed by the August launch of TSET's new interactive nicotine addiction website called Worth It – Episode 59 of the TSET Better Health Podcast explores how the summer of 2026 provided golden opportunities for youth to learn and lead Oklahoma into a healthier future.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Episode 59 of the TSET Better Health Podcast. I am your host, James Tyree, associate director of Integrated Communications at TSET ...

Sarah Carson: And I am Sarah Carson, campaign manager for TSET. Today we are discussing better health as it pertains to kids and teens. Younger people face specific challenges to their health and wellness, such as media and peer pressure to try vaping and other nicotine products, or developing unhealthy habits that result in not getting enough sleep, nutritious foods or physical activity. Conversely, a number of youth are also making healthy choices that improve wellness and are encouraging others, by word or example to join them.

J. Tyree: In this episode, you will hear just a few ways of how Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust empowers youth with information and opportunities to improve their own health and that of others. We will meet a high school student whose involvement with Youth Action for Health Leadership, or YAHL, has helped her personal confidence and health advocacy grow.

S. Carson: You'll also be introduced to the Youth Medical Mentorship program that inspires middle schoolers to consider careers in the medical and healthcare fields. Thanks to new TSET funding, the founder expects to expand the program to all 77 counties. But first, a fellow TSET campaign manager will give us a sneak peek of a new and innovative website under the TSET Healthy Youth Initiative that is worth your attention.

Candace Bacon: My name is Candace Bacon and I am a campaign manager at TSET. I currently manage Shape Your Future and our TSET Healthy Youth Initiative, which contains one of our newest brands that's about to launch called Worth It.

S. Carson: Thanks for joining us, Candice. Tell us more about this new TSET brand for youth.

C. Bacon: So, Worth It is a new nicotine prevention resource and it's designed specifically for Oklahoma teens. We know that today's teens are growing up in a completely different world than previous generations and vaping and nicotine products are ever-changing and they're everywhere. So they're seeing them in their social media feeds. They're seeing them on influencers who are being presented to them in videos. Their peers are using these nicotine products. So Worth It, for us, is trying to provide teens with honest information that is relevant and easy to understand.

And I think one of the things that we really tried to focus on is letting teens explore this information in a way that connects how nicotine affects the things that they care about the most, whether that's their athletic performance, their friendships, their finances, their mental health, or the goals that they have for themselves for their future. So instead of us talking at teens, we wanted to create something that respects them, it meets them where they're at and helps them make informed decisions.

S. Carson: TSET has websites that educate people on youth health and tobacco and vape use. So why Worth It and why is now the right time for it?

C. Bacon: You're right. TSET does have a lot of information and we have websites that are informing people about tobacco and nicotine use. I would say with this campaign, we did spend a lot of time listening to teens before creating this brand. So through audience research and message testing, we found that their traditional nicotine prevention messages just weren't connecting the way that they used to. So teens already know that adults don't want them to vape. They've heard that message before. That's not anything new. But what they responded to instead is a conversation about their lives. So what they care about, what they're working toward and what they don't want nicotine to take away from them.

So it's not about telling them what not to do. It's just about reminding them what's worth protecting. And we know that one in five Oklahoma high school students report using e-cigarettes, which is more than double the national average. So it's just a reminder for us that prevention still matters, especially before nicotine becomes a daily part of a young person's life.

S. Carson: What excites you most about the website?

C. Bacon: I think one of the things that to me is the most exciting and I'm hoping that teens will find the most useful for them is there's an interactive sentence builder on the homepage. So it lets them personalize their experience and explore the topics that they're interested in and the questions that they really have. So you can change things like how does addiction affect my body, my future? How does vaping affect my brain, my finances? So giving them the power to do that research and get the information presented to them in a way that is relevant.

S. Carson: About when will the website launch?

C. Bacon: The website is WorthItOK and that's just the letters OK.com. So WorthitOK.com and that will launch in early August. We are planning for Monday, August 3rd.

S. Carson: And finally, Worth It aligns with TSET's larger Healthy Youth Initiative. How do these programs aim to help kids and teens to make good choices for their own health?

C. Bacon: I think one thing I appreciate the most about the TSET Health Youth Initiative is that none of the programs really exist in isolation. They're really all working toward the same goal, which is to help young people build healthy habits that will hopefully last them for a lifetime. So Worth It is trying to help prevent nicotine use before it starts. We have My Life, My Quit, which is a free support for teens who are already using vapes or nicotine products and they want help quitting. And it's confidential. So again, we're really trying to meet teens where they're at. We have Swap Up, which helps them make healthier food and drink choices through realistic everyday swaps and changes.

And we also have YAHL, that's the Youth Action for Health Leadership. So YAHL gives teens the opportunity to become leaders and to advocate for healthier schools, healthier communities. These programs together recognize that healthy habits aren't built through one big decision. They're built through everyday small choices. And our goal is to make those healthy choices easier and more accessible and really more relevant for Oklahoma teens.

S. Carson: Thank you for joining the podcast today to tell us about this new nicotine prevention site for youth.

C. Bacon: Thank you so much for having me.

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J. Tyree: Public health involves many areas relating to health and wellness, but they all boil down to enhancing our individual **and** collective well-being, quality of life and longevity. And the cool thing is we all can contribute to creating healthier living environments

S. Carson: Nicotine is so powerfully addictive, but youth have power as well. The power to get accurate information about tobacco and other nicotine products and the power to enjoy a healthy life free of tobacco products – no matter what deceptive messaging the tobacco industry throws at them. I appreciate Candice explaining how the new Worth It website at WorthItOK.com helps young ones direct their own learning according to their questions and interests.

J. Tyree: We appreciate that conversation and I know you will enjoy one I had recently with a member of Youth Action for Health Leadership, or YAHL, shortly after meeting her and dozens of other students at the annual YAHL Summit. She really cares about the health of her family, school and community, so let's meet her now.

S. Valles: Hi, my name is Stephanie Valles. I am from Hennessy, Oklahoma. I will be a junior at Hennessy High School.

J. Tyree: How long have you been a YAHL member and what, exactly, prompted you to join?

S. Valles: I have been a YAHL member for two years and I just completed my first year on the YAHL leadership team. What prompted me to join? Well, I live in a small town where it's hard to find dedicated leaders that care about issues like tobacco and health. And I found an organization that not only helps the school, but also helps the community. And seeing this made me realize like, "Wow, I want to be a part of this." And I've been in a lot of programs like Student Council, National Honor Society, and they all really work with the school, but YAHL works with the school and the community, which is just something different and something unique. And I wanted to help make a change about that.

J. Tyree: What influence did your family, especially your dad, have on your keen interest in health?

S. Valles: Well, health has really been a situation in my family. My whole dad's side comes from really bad health issues like Type 1 diabetes, Type 2 diabetes, high insulin, to the point where they have to take medication. They also have a really bad addiction with cigarette problems. My dad, almost all his life when he was 16, he started using cigarettes and he thought it was normal to use those products. And he wasn't really aware of those problems, what cigarettes had and what they were doing to his health. He was in a really bad state.

When I was about 10, I told him, he should stop using cigarettes, they're just a really bad thing for your health. I've personally seen the effects that tobacco can do to you, he always came with a smell, and it's just really bad. And the fact that he didn't know what he was doing because he thought it was normal because of his whole family, that's just really sad. And now I convinced him to quit and he's six years free from all tobacco. He's one of the only people from his family that is healthy, doesn't smoke. He is in a really good track and not only for my family, but also for me, that's just like a huge impact in my life. And seeing him quit just made me realize that some people can have that addiction, but it's never too late to quit.

J. Tyree: How's your dad doing now?

S. Valles: He is healthy, he runs up to like six miles a day and he's really healthy. And just seeing him have that huge change in his life, like I said, made me realize that not only did it make me feel really good inside, but it also opened, you could say, another chapter of my life. And I can see now that I can help other people be aware of all the problems that those issues can have.

J. Tyree: What have been your favorite experiences so far with YAHL and its programs?

S. Valles: I have had so many favorite experiences, but I have two that are just beyond, beyond my favorite. The first is Summit, which is like the last week of June. It's really cool because you get to spend, I think, four days in Oklahoma City and you get to meet 50 other leaders from all over Oklahoma. And some you have seen, but mostly all of them you have never seen before in your life. And it just opens another perspective because you're like, "Wow, I'm not the only one that is doing this." So Summit is a really big and fun experience that I've had.

It has a bunch of opportunities, like we have sessions that helps us learn more about YAHL and the campaigns, Counteract Tobacco 24/7 and Elevate Student Health. We learn so much more about those campaigns and how we can bring it into our schools. And then we also get to meet other leaders, and the fun, the lasting friendships that you get from Summit is really, really cool.

And then the other experience is Day at the Capitol, which you can only be in the leadership team to go, to be invited. And that is one weekend, and you get to stay at a hotel and you get to go to the Capitol, and not only just going, but you also get to speak to legislators, senators. I spoke to my district leader, and do just a mini presentation about all of what YAHL is about. And those opportunities just make me feel like I'm getting my voice heard.

J. Tyree: What health or wellness concern would you like to address in the coming school year?

S. Valles: A big problem that I really want to fix is our water filters. Because last year I've noticed that in the cafeteria, one of the water fountains always had this red light, and the filter just was never changed. And that's just a big problem.

We're fortunate to have our water bottles in class and everything, but you have to be concerned if you're going to get a good water, you shouldn't be concerned about that. And we had a water fountain that just wasn't good in the cafeteria, and we also had another one in the choir and band room, which is where I spend most of my times, because I'm in choir and in band. And the water fountain, it would just go to a red light, to a green light. And I just want to fix that.

J. Tyree: I hope that goes really well, Stephanie. You are really taking a lead on promoting health, but who has helped or encouraged you along the way with your advocacy?

S. Valles: I am very grateful for a lot of people. But there's my YAHL YFO, Svera. I am very grateful for her because she's one of my leaders in the part that I live in for YAHL. I've done elementary presentations and middle school presentations, and even like a partner presentation, but I have never felt unprepared to do any of that. She has always made sure that I was prepared, I really want to give a shout out to her and all the other YFOs. They all really make sure that we're all prepared and help us through the YAHL program. Somebody who also helped was my parents. My dad especially. He really inspired me every day to run, take care of my health.

My parents, they take me and my siblings to go run 5Ks. We went to the OKC 5K. We even go to Texas sometimes and go run the 5Ks. We do that as a family thing, but it's not only fun, it's also helping your health. And they really have inspired me to keep on going.

J. Tyree: Two questions, Stephanie: What is a YFO and how has YAHL helped you grow as a person, but also skill-wise?

S. Valles: Youth field organizer.

So the thing about YAHL is that you're always communicating. When I first came into YAHL, I was really shy and I hid behind others. I was scared that others were going to judge me. And growing into the YAHL program, now having these experiences, it just made me communicate with others, and now I can communicate in front of my whole middle school.

I even read at my church, and I feel like communication just overall is a skill that YAHL has helped me gain. And you're going to use communication for the rest of your life, whether it's applying for universities or getting a job, or simply talking to your other peers. But YAHL has also helped me step out of my comfort zone. That's a really huge deal for me. At the YAHL summit, one of those days we get to go out to the streets of OKC and ask other people to take surveys if they wanted to, asking them, "Hi, could you take this survey?" And explaining what YAHL is. YAHL has helped me gain and grow as a person.

J. Tyree: That is fantastic and I am happy for you. Is there anything else you would like to say in closing?

S. Valles: The fact that at the networking event, I didn't know that I was going to be invited to a podcast. Just those opportunities, that's insane, that's amazing. And having my voice heard, it's all been a life changing experience for me. And I want to say thank you for having me on this podcast.

J. Tyree: Well, thank you for sharing your story with us.

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S. Carson: What an inspiring person, James. She sounds like a natural leader, and the activities she engages in through YAH! are helping to make her an even stronger and more confident leader, student and person. And like Stephanie said, we appreciate all the students and their adult organizers that are working so diligently to improve the health environments of their schools and communities.

J. Tyree: Sarah, now it's time to introduce our listeners to a physician who founded a non-profit organization that striving to get even younger youths across Oklahoma interested in pursuing careers in medicine and healthcare.

C. McNeil: I am Dr. Christopher McNeil. I am the executive director and founder for Youth Medical Mentorship.

J. Tyree: Please tell us more about Youth Medical Mentorship program you started.

C. McNeil: Yeah. Youth Medical Mentorship is a homegrown healthcare workforce development program. And we do this through health literacy. We started out in probably 2023, I would say, is when the IRS officially confirmed us as Youth Medical Mentorship and that was around 30 students. To today, it's climbed to over 3,000 students across 12 counties and 31 schools.

J. Tyree: That's a lot of kids with some involvement with the program. So, how, exactly does it work and at what age?

C. McNeil: The programming officially starts roughly 11 to 12 years old. And that was intentionally built because, as we looked at a lot of our programs across school districts, it was middle school that had the biggest deficit of intentional programming and outreach for kids. And so it's just a matter of dosage and frequency. If the kids don't see it, then they really forget that it's something that they can do. And so we started the program in middle school to really build that robust bridge to the dreams they had in elementary school to still manifest in middle school and then be able to give way to internships and other dedicated opportunities by high school.

The really powerful connecting piece in all this is when we look at Oklahoma from an educator standpoint, we don't really introduce health sciences as career or curriculum until 10th grade. So already we're at a deficit, especially in certain areas where you might not have a veteran teacher that's able to even get to this part of the curriculum or

offer these types of advanced classes. These students and these communities have had a lack of healthcare professionals because there's no way for them to grow them from the ground up internally and as a homegrown healthcare professional. So all these pieces collates into what we think is the most robust programming starting in middle school, but we have program across the entire spectrum. So students, once they get interested, we keep them locked in.

J. Tyree: How, exactly, does the program connect with kids?

C. McNeil: What we try to do is meet the schools where they're at and understanding that there's such a huge upside to what we can do in empowering students if we are able to overcome some of the resource deficits that we have in Oklahoma to be able to get students what they need and that's just to be able to raise the standard.

So what becomes really unique for your family member is being able to introduce her to something that she, A) may have never seen before or maybe have only seen on TV. B, to use her hands in a way that she may have never realized. So maybe something that she has done before, like braiding hair or going fishing with you has now evolved into suturing or being able to provide lifesaving interventions. She just didn't realize she had that skill and that it was transferable just as much as we talk about building a resume or being able to speak in public.

So if these things aren't accessible to students, then they don't see the power of that dexterity that can be trained and harnessed for what they can be for their community. And that's just a homegrown hero. So those are the types of things that we see and we bring it out in, I think, really unique ways, being able to connect with individuals locally to be able to see what skill sets that we might have missed or what skill sets the community really needs and being able to have the community's voice embedded in everything that we do.

J. Tyree: How does the Youth Medical Mentorship work in Oklahoma schools?

C. McNeil: So the afterschool program works by being able to have a classroom that is essentially the right size for the amount of kids that are in the room. So in places like Claremore, you have a whole auditorium. Students are showing up before school at 7:30. But places like Dewar, Oklahoma have an afterschool program. And it's more of your traditional setting, but the graduating class might be anywhere from 56 kids. So you have a completely different spectrum of what's needed. Places like Memorial have in-school programs and Edison here in Tulsa have in-school programs. So it looks a little different in terms of kids are assigned that. The attendance looks much different in that regard, but in every space you have a medical mentor that is essentially coming into the child's life and being able to showcase, "This is a day in my life and I want you to look at this opportunity as my colleague and not just the student."

J. Tyree: This summer, there was a Youth Medical Summit in Tulsa followed by another one in Oklahoma City. What happens at these events?

C. McNeil: And so it's like the Magic School bus, right? And we're able to put tools in students' hands, allow them to explore the human body as an agent of change and to be able to get their hands on things that I've trained with as a resident after completing medical school, that now I'm trying to build my dexterity to save a patient's life when it's just me by myself.

What would you feel? What would you see? What would you smell? What you hear? These are all, I think, qualities that we try to embark and embrace on. This is going to be a student's first exposure to medicine. It might be a parent's first positive exposure to medicine. And so what we try to do is give a huge amount of introduction to medicine to be able to understand what a student likes and for them to have a palette for, wow, these are all the different things.

So for medicine, I think understanding that it's like music. In a band you might enjoy a particular type of sound, but you don't know it took 18 instruments to produce this tune. And so when people see that version of medicine, it's an eye-opening experience and that's what we try to create. So you walk in, you are greeted by smiling faces from the community. The student is put into a white coat to immerse them in this experience and they're referred to as doc for the rest of the day. Even though there's multiple different versions of our healthcare professionals that wear white coats, the white coat is very iconic for healthcare.

So we use that as a conduit for the student to see where they can be. And throughout the day, they're essentially put on call. So they're able to see maybe eight to 12 different healthcare specialties in 15 minute blocks that we use to build really important topics in medicine, we use to build relationships with businesses outside of the state that we need to bring here, and we use to build existing and new partnerships with schools and healthcare infrastructure to educational infrastructure so we can make medical education accessible much earlier than medical school. And this is what essentially builds that bridge.

And I think it's really powerful for the kids to then connect education to this opportunity to see like, wow, that could be me. I could be doing this every day. And it's something that they also see as you have to work on a team. So just like sports, you have those pieces that you have to put together. All these pieces are integrally designed for the student to be able to be the answer to what we need in the future for healthcare and the health of Oklahoma. So these pieces are really cool to see in real time.

J. Tyree: What is just one example of a unique medical experience a student at the summit would encounter?

C. McNeil: One other company we have coming in actually coming from Switzerland and they have an AI model for how to use ultrasound. So I can take a student that's never held an ultrasound or maybe they only know it from what they've seen on movies or their mom going in for an ultrasound for your younger brother or sister. [00:14:30] And now the ultrasound's in their hand and they can do an echocardiogram, looking at the heart as a big focus with us. And our TSET Legacy Grant is cardiovascular care. So being able for students to understand how the heart works and the signs and symptoms of disease are going to be really imperative to making sure we have primary care providers and access.

We have spine surgeons coming in from Oklahoma City and really powerful businesses, business partnerships that have been integral to the design of building up of Youth Medical Mentorship. So really cool to see the differences in resources that are available and how kids can have access to those things. And we build that intentionally.

C. McNeil: So hoping that the students are able to have an amazing time, as amazing time as we do. We quiz them at the beginning, quiz them at the end. There are going to be some VR headsets for them to see what their first hospital experience might look like and a certificate to be able to be registered for HIPAA, so they can come in and do internships and shadow. So again, it just really builds that immersive experience of what's my next step in my career. And you'll find all that at the summit.

J. Tyree: You just mentioned the TSET Legacy Grant that your program recently received. How will this historic grant help propel the program even further?

C. McNeil: Absolutely. We are very honored to partner with TSET and be able to provide this opportunity across the state to students that are in rural underserved, urban underserved and otherwise sometimes remote areas that they may have never even seen a physician in their own hometown because they have to drive 50 miles to get somewhere else. So the model for Youth Medical Mentorship is really powerful, powered by TSET because we're able to find the ingredients needed in a town so the town can build its own healthcare professional workforce. And when you start to see these ingredients exist in some of these places, it becomes a really powerful measure for how we can take a place like Okfuskee County and Okemah, which is ranked 76 out of 77 counties in terms of health outcomes, and be able to see that change overnight by looking at some really powerful metrics.

So with TSET being able to have the ability to help us build out our data infrastructure, we can look at Okemah and know that, for their graduating class, every six years we should have a physician coming out of the ranks. And if you know anything about healthcare, when a student makes a decision like, "Hey, I want to do pre-med in college and I'm going to take these classes in high school," that pathway doesn't start when they start college. That pathway starts much earlier. Being able to take the right classes in seventh and eighth grade so you have the academic rigor to survive the onslaught of photosynthesis and cellular respiration and all these things that, for the most part, they

can be really daunting tasks for students if you're coming from a family that has never pursued these exploits.

And how do you make that argument in some of these places? Well, you have to build the child from the ground up. You have to be a part of that process of recruitment and retention by the mentors, by the experiences, by the succession planning, by building them from a research perspective, from a mentality perspective, a professional development perspective. And all these things are really the jobs of mentors in that community.

So what we do with the funding is we find those individuals that have that power to inspire students and they are those role models in the community. And rather than us being the expert of a place like Okemah or Harmon County, what we do is invest in the people there and they are the experts. And so that allows us to essentially build the same operating model in these communities with the goal being to get to all 77 counties across the state of Oklahoma and they each have their own metrics for sustainability. And so TSET has allowed us to light that spark. And like I said, we've gone from three counties to 12 counties almost overnight in 2026. And that's been a result of the incredible investment of the TSET Legacy Grant.

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S. Carson: A little more information on the TSET Legacy Grants: The TSET Board of Directors awarded 14 grants totaling about \$150 million to projects and programs that will help transform health across Oklahoma, The historic funding opportunity coincided with TSET's 25th anniversary in 2025. The Youth Medical Mentorship program embodies two of the board's top priorities: improving youth wellness and increasing access to health care, especially in underserved areas of our state.

J. Tyree: As we said earlier, young ones in Oklahoma face a number of challenges to good health. But there are a lot of caring adults, innovative programs and yes, committed youth taking charge of their own futures, that are taking on these challenges and helping their homes, schools and communities becoming healthier places to live, learn and play. And TSET will continue to offer funding opportunities and free resources to help local Oklahomans live healthier.

J. Tyree: Another website to visit often is <https://oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast>, where you can listen to this or any episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast. They can also be downloaded anywhere you normally listen to podcasts.

S. Carson: Thank you for joining us today. We hope you enjoyed this episode, and I invite you to check out any past episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast by visiting is <https://oklahoma.gov/tset/podcast>. Episodes can also be downloaded on any platform where you normally listen to podcasts. So until next time, this is Sarah Carson ...

J. Tyree: And James Tyree, wishing you peace ...

S. Carson: And better health.