

2025 VFHY Annual Report:

Building Healthier Futures for Hampton Roads Youth

The Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth supports prevention efforts across the Commonwealth that are rooted in research, accountability, and community trust. Through three-year Youth Development grants, VFHY supports local organizations in implementing evidence-based tobacco and nicotine prevention curriculums for youth in their communities.

At Horizons Hampton Roads, that investment supports the instruction of the CATCH My Breath program as part of a comprehensive approach to youth development — pairing classroom instruction with healthy alternatives that help students put prevention skills into practice.

“We were seeing vaping become more of an issue with our middle and high school students,” said Dr. Velvet Smith, executive director of Horizons Hampton Roads. “VFHY funding gave us the opportunity to choose a program that was scientifically based and that fit our mission.”

Horizons serves youth from kindergarten through high school in Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Virginia Beach, with a focus on long-term academic success, healthy lifestyles, and leadership development. With VFHY support, the organization embedded CATCH My Breath into its existing summer programming for students in grades 5–8, integrating prevention into its broader youth development model rather than treating it as a standalone lesson.

Over two years, approximately 225 students have participated, with more than 100 youth reached in 2025.

That sustained engagement matters. Research shows that delaying first use of nicotine significantly reduces the risk of long-term addiction and future substance use. A recent randomized controlled trial of CATCH My Breath found that students who received the program had nearly four times lower odds of initiating e-cigarette use by eighth grade compared with peers who did not receive the curriculum. Students also demonstrated stronger refusal skills and more negative expectations about vaping.

Horizons reinforces those lessons by pairing prevention education with healthy alternatives. Summer programming includes swimming, teen fitness classes, bike education, and more — providing positive replacement behaviors and reinforcing decision-making skills.

“We’re not just telling kids what not to do,” Smith said. “We’re helping them practice healthy choices and see what those choices look like in real life.”

High school students play a leadership role, serving as mentors and guest speakers for younger participants. Because many Horizons students return year after year, often spending six or more summers in the program, peer influence becomes a powerful prevention tool.

“Kids listen to other kids,” Smith said. “When prevention messages come from students they trust and look up to, it has a lasting impact.”

Parents have noticed changes as well. Through required grant surveys and ongoing family engagement, parents report improved communication with their children — not only about vaping and tobacco, but about mental health, peer pressure, and other high-risk behaviors.

For Smith, the success of CATCH My Breath at Horizons reflects the strength of VFHY’s approach: investing in evidence-based prevention while giving grantees flexibility to select from 12 vetted programs that best meet local needs.

“This works because it’s not disconnected from what we already do,” she said. “VFHY gave us the resources to strengthen what was already there.”

As Virginia continues to address youth vaping and nicotine use, community-led programs like CATCH My Breath demonstrate how strategic, accountable investment in prevention can protect young people and support healthy communities across the Commonwealth.