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D.C. paves the way for marijuana businesses to operate near schools in violation of federal law; now parents are fighting back

District Officials Acknowledge that the Location is Illegal Under the Federal Drug-Free School Zone Law but Will Turn a Blind Eye to the Health and Safety of DC Children

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Late last week the District of Columbia Attorney General’s office paved the way for D.C. to allow “medical marijuana” stores to operate near schools and daycare centers, in violation of a federal law designed to protect children. Yesterday, a group called “1,000 Feet” lodged a [formal protest](#) with the District of Columbia’s Alcoholic Beverage and Cannabis Administration (ABCA) opposing the imminent approval of a license for a marijuana dispensary slated to open near several schools in the Palisades neighborhood of NW D.C. Under the [Federal Drug-Free School Zone law](#), it is illegal to distribute marijuana within 1,000 feet of public or private schools, yet several elementary schools are within 1,000 feet of the proposed dispensary’s location. Currently, D.C. law allows marijuana stores to operate within 300 feet of schools in direct contradiction to the federal law and bizarrely, to D.C.’s own regulations stating that liquor stores should be located at least 400 feet from schools. And the regulatory agency overseeing D.C.’s marijuana retailing scheme, [ABCA, recently asserted](#) that nothing prevents it from issuing licenses to distribute marijuana in Federal Drug-Free School Zones, even if that violates the law.

After a group of concerned parents, business owners and community members [raised the alarm](#) with Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3D (ANC3D) about a marijuana dispensary operating just a few doors down from an early childhood learning center and across the street from a school, ANC3D took the striking decision to side with the dispensary and allow its application for a medical cannabis dispensary license to proceed unopposed. In response to ANC3D’s decision, the group coalesced under the name “1,000 Feet” and mobilized more than 400 signatures on a [petition](#) to stop the dispensary from opening in the heart of the community’s elementary and preschool corridor. Initially slated to call its store “Dessert First,” the dispensary has stated it plans to sell marijuana in traditional form as well as marijuana edibles, which can often look like regular candy. Despite their ordinary appearance, just one edible can contain high doses of THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana, which can lead to overdose effects in children. The marijuana dispensary’s [business plan](#) obtained under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) showed that despite its claims to community members that it would operate as a medical cannabis dispensary with a look and feel of a holistic doctor’s office, the business is planning to promote both outdoor and indoor consumption of marijuana, including by having a “smoke garden” outside the store, and hold tasting events—all in close proximity to the 1,200 or so children that attend the [Little Ivies](#) childcare; [Our Lady of Victory School](#); [the River School](#); [St. Patrick’s Episcopal Day School](#); and [the Lab School](#).

Driven by its concerns about children’s and teens’ exposure to marijuana, 1,000 Feet is taking its fight to the City Council and beyond if necessary, joining forces with other educational, child health and parent groups in the area to push D.C. to raise its distance requirement. 1,000 Feet [published an analysis](#) showing that that D.C.’s 300-foot restriction is the lowest among all the major cities to have legalized marijuana, with most other localities prohibiting its sale within anywhere from 500 to 1,000 feet of schools.

“It is unthinkable that D.C. would allow kids as young as 3 years old to be so directly exposed to the sale and consumption of drugs next to the places where they learn and play. D.C. is an outlier among all the major cities that have legalized pot in allowing marijuana sales so close to schools,” said Michelle Vassallo, a business owner and parent of children attending school near the would-be dispensary.

“While D.C. has decriminalized marijuana, common sense dictates that stores selling pot have no business operating next door to kids’ schools. Marijuana poses a danger to children’s health. Studies have shown that exposure to marijuana at a young age puts children at risk for developing lifelong problems with drug addiction,” said Lucy Sullivan, a member of 1,000 Feet, public health advocate and parent of elementary school students in one of the affected schools. “D.C. is prioritizing the financial interests of the cannabis industry over the health and safety of the city’s kids and is effectively normalizing drug use for kids.”
