

Policy Brief on: *Drug Testing of Adolescents in Schools*

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Introduction:

Drug testing for substances of abuse has been claimed as a method to detect and deter drug use by adolescents. The U.S. Supreme Court established the legality of high school drug testing programs among those engaged in extracurricular activities, and the federal government has established funding for high schools to drug test students through grants from the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, parents or guardians can purchase drug testing kits on the Internet for use at home. However, school random drug testing is a controversial issue and the efficacy, cost effectiveness, and risks of this procedure have not been established. While some supporters report favorable results from their personal experiences with school-based drug testing, formal studies published to date have not as yet shown drug testing to be an effective deterrent, and research has identified risks associated with implementation.

Policy Implications:

Random or "suspicionless" drug testing is used as a strategy to detect and reduce drug use by adolescents. Two Supreme Court decisions established the legality of suspicionless school-based drug testing programs for students who participate in sports (*Vernonia School District vs. Acton*, 1995) and those participating in extracurricular activities (*Earls vs. Tecumseh School District*, 2002). The Department of Justice considered the drug testing programs resulting from the *Vernonia* ruling effective based solely on anecdotal teacher reports of less drug use by students and fewer disciplinary problems after the implementation of drug testing.

In 2002, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy publication "What you need to know about drug testing in schools," (ONDCP, 2002) suggested that communities should consider establishing drug testing policy in schools, stating, "The expectation that they may be randomly tested is enough to make some students stop using drugs - or never start in the first place." These claims were based on anecdote and testimonial. Despite limited research-based evidence, and no randomized control trial publications, the federal government proposed \$23 million to support the development of school drug testing programs in the 2003 Presidential State of the Union address.

Studying the efficacy of random drug testing programs has proven challenging and expensive. The only large randomized controlled trial of school-based suspicionless drug testing ever reported in the medical literature (Goldberg et al., 2007) was criticized by some as unethical because students enrolled in schools randomized to the drug testing arm were mandated to participate in drug testing programs paid for by the study in order to be eligible for sports participation, raising concerns of coercion (Shamoo and Moreno, 2004) even though participating school boards created and ratified a drug testing policy for athletes in their respective schools (Chiodo et al., 2004). Results from this and its pilot study have been inconclusive regarding a deterrent effect and have raised concerns regarding risk (Goldberg et al., 2007; Goldberg et al., 2003). Both study analyses found that specific risk factors for future drug use were increased, compared to student athletes not subject to random, suspicionless testing. Based on the available information, the American Academy of Pediatrics added an amendment in 2007 to their drug testing policy statement recommending that school- and home-based drug testing programs for adolescents should not be implemented until their safety and efficacy had been scientifically established (Knight and Mears, 2007).

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Given the cost, lack of consistent deterrent effects, and potential risks of random drug testing, future detection efforts should prioritize techniques with proven validity and reliability such as interview-based population screening (Knight et al., 2000; Knight et al., 2002) to determine drug use and intervene appropriately, while evidence-based prevention programs should be used to deter substance use and abuse. Research has shown that drug testing can reduce drug use in the treatment setting, (Olmstead et al., 2007) and further research is necessary to determine how to incorporate successful models into school systems, including the number of tests performed, specimen type (urine, saliva, sweat, hair), and collection method, and whether to include general populations (such as all students participating in extracurricular activities) or limit testing to adolescents previously identified as using drugs.

Key Results

- A relatively small number of schools have random drug testing programs; this number appeared to be increasing in the early 2000s.
- A large cross-sectional study found no difference in the rates of marijuana or other illicit drug use by students in schools with drug testing programs versus those without.
- A small case-control pilot study of random drug testing of athletes found a significant decrease in past 30 day illicit drug use by athletes attending an experimental school with a drug testing program compared to athletes attending a control school. Goldberg et al. also found that athletes in the experimental school expressed more attitudes associated with increased drug use, suggesting that students exposed to drug testing may have higher risk of future drug use than peers in the control school.
- The results of the only randomized controlled trial of school drug testing published to date were inconclusive, showing decreased past year drug use at two time points but not at three others, and no reduction in past month drug use. As in the pilot study, athletes exposed to drug testing expressed more attitudes associated with increased drug use than those in control schools.
- A majority (74.1%) of students surveyed in a rural school district that was about to begin a random drug testing program believed that random drug testing would be effective in reducing drug use in their school, and 45% thought that random drug testing at school was a "good idea."
- A survey of middle and high school students in the rural northwestern area of the United States found that middle school students were more likely to endorse drug testing than were high school students, who were more likely to believe that drug testing violated their privacy.
- Drug tests are susceptible to misinterpretation.
- Students may put themselves at risk by attempting to defeat a drug test.

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http://saprp.org/knowledgeassets/knowledge_detail.cfm?KAID=16