

# MANDATORY-RANDOMISED STUDENT DRUG TESTS

Following a recent study published by the US Department of Education on *The Effectiveness of Mandatory- Random Student Drug Testing* (2010) in US schools it seems timely to update our briefing on drug testing in schools (DEF, 2006). The trial carried out in a cluster of southern states in the USA has reported positive results in reducing substance use in schools.

## THE STUDY

From spring 2007- spring 2008 a trial was carried out in 7 districts enabling 20 schools to carry out mandatory randomised drug tests on students. Permission had to be granted by both the student and parent for this to take place. The study focused on students engaged in extracurricular, competitive activities. The schools were required to test a minimum of 50% of the students eligible for tests and were required to test for marijuana, amphetamines, cocaine, methamphetamines, and opiates. Test for tobacco and alcohol were also carried out. Schools were able to choose the time and frequency of tests as well as the extracurricular activities that they would test in addition to the required sports: football, volleyball, basketball, track and field, golf, softball, and baseball. Two districts tested solely amongst those engaged in sports but other schools extended the activities to other competitive activities such as choir and band.

Students who did not engage in these activities were not subject to testing but filled in surveys along with those who were subject to tests. It was hoped that there would be signs of a spillover effect onto the students exempt from testing with a reduction in their substance use as well.

## THE RESULTS

The study's results show that there was a reduced percentage of students reporting substance use in the last 30 days, for those subject to testing, 16% reported having used substances in comparison with 22% of those not subject to testing. Whilst this is a significant reduction, this is only in reported use, only 38 of the 3476 test carried out proved positive, far lower than the reported rate. There are a number of factors to consider such as the accuracy and honesty in the survey responses. For those in schools where there was not drug testing there is no way of knowing if this is an accurate report.

Given that it is widely supported that engagement with extracurricular activities is a protective factor which can build a positive relationship with the school, by only testing those engaged in such activities misses out the groups potentially disengaged with the school who are arguably more at risk of substance use. The hope of a spillover effect onto these students was not found; 36% in both testing and non-testing schools reported that they had used substances in the last 30 days. Moreover, even for those who were in testing schools the perceptions of drugs did not differ from

their counterparts, 34% reported that they would probably or definitely use substances in the next 12 months in comparison with 33% of those in non-testing schools.

## LIMITATIONS

The study was carried out only in southern states in districts that supported such methods, due to the geographical limitation of this study it is not appropriate to say that these results could be applied to a national or international level.

Whilst these results may appear, at first glance, to show small but promising results, the intervention went alongside ongoing prevention and was not a replacement. Once the costs of the intervention are considered alongside the established concerns of infringement on rights, the legal and moral questions that arise and the lack of impact in the wider group of students it does not add power to previous debates.

## CHANGES TO THE DEBATE?

With the ACMD amongst senior advisors, NGOs and studies (ANCEDT, 2009) arguing against the use of drug testing in schools there is still a strong argument for alternative approaches. The alternatives to drug testing such as encouraging and working with students to develop a positive relationship and association with their school; working with families and the wider community; targeting students who might be at risk; and classroom-based interventions offer a more integrated and inclusive approach to prevention and education without infringing on students' rights. The benefits of carrying out drug testing in schools still does not outweigh the costs in both financial terms and in damage to relations in schools and their communities.

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