



# Public Policy Briefing

This paper is intended to set out the current knowledge and opinion on random drug testing in schools.

## Random Drug Testing in English Schools

In 2005 and 2006 two schools in England began random drug testing their pupils; the Abbey School in Faversham, and the National School in Hucknall. In May the DfES announced plans to undertake the first UK research into the impact of random drug testing of pupils.

This paper is intended to provide a short overview of the current knowledge about random testing and to raise some questions that we hope will aid the debate on this subject.

There is not a single view on using random drug testing in schools. Many are against it believing that testing is not compatible with creating a supportive environment for young people's learning. Some take the view that this is something that

individual schools should be able to employ in trying to reduce the harm that is done by illegal drugs.

### How has it worked up to now?

At the Abbey School 20 pupils were tested each week. Pupils were given a mouth swab testing for illegal drugs, including cannabis, cocaine, and heroin; the substances tested for did not include the drugs most commonly used by young people - tobacco and alcohol. 86% of pupils agreed to testing and of the 600 tests carried out, only one returned a positive result (for cannabis use).

Cost to the school will vary, depending on the number of tests undertaken and the need to test against false positives.

### Questions for School Leaders and Policy Makers:

School communities contemplating introducing drug testing in their school may want to ask the following questions before implementing a change in policy:

- Have you considered the range of options with partner agencies (e.g. D(A) AT and police)?
- How will drug testing be evaluated over a period of time? And what effect should be measured (behaviour, attendance, drug use)?
- Will drug use by young people be measured with valid and reliable tools, before, during and after the drug testing trial?
- Will staff be tested?

- Will pupils be able to give genuinely informed consent for testing?
- How will individual pupil's results remain confidential?
- How will you ensure that testing is a pastoral intervention, not disciplinary?
- Will you be able to provide the back up and support that young people and parents need if a pupil has a positive test result?
- Will your approach to drug education be compromised by the introduction of testing?
- Where will funding come from and how long will it last?

### What guidance do schools have on drug testing?

The DfES has provided the following guidance for schools on drug testing pupils. For the definitive version of the guidance please refer to *Drugs: Guidance for Schools* (DfES, 2004).

Headteachers are within their rights to test pupils on school premises. They are advised to involve local partners, including the police, and consider a set of issues outlined below.

Schools are told they must consider very carefully whether the introduction of testing:

- is consistent with the pastoral responsibility of the school to create a supportive environment;
- will lead to labelling and be damaging to pupils concerned;
- will result in appropriate support for pupils most in need;
- is feasible and an effective use of school resources, and those of the police, where involved;

Once a decision to go ahead has been taken schools are advised to make sure, in advance, that:

- the intention to use such an approach is clearly stated in the school's drug policy
- parents/carers have given their consent
- procedures are in place to remove pupils for whom consent is not given
- plans are in place to deal with any media interest.

## The claims for random drug testing:

Many of the advocates for random testing in England do not claim that testing prevents drug use, but say it can improve behaviour and exam results. Peter Walker, the retired headteacher at the Abbey School, has been championing random testing. He said:

"I feel that the drug testing has helped people feel much safer. The school has seen a marked improvement in GCSE pass rates. It has had an effect on contributions in the classroom and on behaviour - with far less disruption and that kind of thing."

The Coalition Against Cannabis - not a Drug Education Forum member - say:

The implementation of Random Pupil Drug Testing (RPDT) in schools gives pupils a clear signal that illegal drug use is not tolerated at school... Drug testing in schools should never be a stand-alone response to the drug problem. It should be only one component of a broader program designed to reduce

In the United States where schools have been testing young people for longer some research carried out with school principles has concluded that random testing is "effective in reducing the temptation to use drugs and alcohol."

However, this view does have critics. Professor Neil McKeganey in his report *Random drug testing of schoolchildren; A shot in the arm or a shot in the foot for drug prevention?* says:

"it is very difficult to regard such statements as proof of the effectiveness of drug-testing programmes in reducing drug use or changing students' attitudes."

Nevertheless, Professor McKeganey supports a trial of random drug testing. In an article for The Herald he said:

There are difficult questions to answer, but they are not so difficult as to rule out even trying to see if drug testing is an effective method of drug prevention. And if drug testing were effective would that mean we should mount a national scheme of regular testing? The answer to that question is no. What it would mean is that we could then begin a debate as to whether the ends justify the means, knowing that drug testing is at least one way of reducing teenage drug use.

## The claims against random drug testing:

The most robust American academic research on the effects of random testing on drug use examined the results for over 70,000 pupils. The authors concluded that:

school drug testing was not associated with either the prevalence or frequency of student marijuana use, or of other illicit drug use.

The same study showed that there was no effect on either casual marijuana users or heavy users, meaning that it is not helpful for young people with high or low risk of having problems with drugs at a later stage in their lives.

Other critics of drug testing have argued that the ethical issues raised by such a regime are incompatible with respect for the human rights of pupils, that there is the potential to damage trust between schools and pupils and that testing is an over-reaction to the scale of the problem that we face.

Shami Chakrabarti, director of the human rights organisation Liberty recently said:

"If children learn to live with constant surveillance, random drug testing and sniffer dogs in schools, what kind of citizens will they become?"

Perhaps most importantly the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) in their recently released report, *Pathways to Problems*, said:

We recommend that drug testing and sniffer dogs should not be used in schools. We consider that the complex ethical, technical and organisational issues, the potential impact on the school-pupil relationship and the costs would not be offset by the potential gains.

The government had not, at the time of writing, responded to this recommendation.

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