Random Student Drug Testing Is an Important Tool for Drug Prevention

*Teens and Privacy, 2011*

The Student Drug-Testing Institute was established by the US Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools to provide information on student drug testing programs.

Random student drug testing is foremost a prevention program. Drug testing is one of several tools that schools can use as part of a comprehensive drug prevention effort. Administrators, faculty, and students at schools that conduct testing view random testing as a deterrent, and it gives students a reason to resist peer pressure to try or use drugs. Drug testing can identify students who have started using drugs so that interventions can occur early, or identify students who already have drug problems, so they can be referred for assessment, counseling, or treatment. Drug abuse not only interferes with a student's ability to learn, but it can also disrupt the teaching environment, affecting other students as well. Each school or school district that wants to start a program needs to involve the entire community in determining whether student drug testing is right for their specific situation.

**Student Drug Use**

*How many students actually use drugs?*

Although drug use among America's youth has declined in recent years, many young people continue to abuse harmful substances. The 2008 Monitoring the Future survey shows that drug use among school-age youth has been in a state of decline since the 1990s; however, the proportions of 8th- and 12th-grade students indicating any use of an illicit drug in the 12 months prior to the survey showed rather modest increases since the previous year. Nearly half of 12th graders said that they have used drugs in their lifetime, and almost one-third said that they use marijuana at least monthly. According to another survey conducted in 2006, an estimated 20.4 million Americans aged 12 or older (8.3 percent of the population) were current illicit drug users, using within the past month.

Like use of other illicit drugs, steroid usage has seen a decline since usage peaked among male teens in 1999. However, steroid abuse is still a problem for many young people. The 2008 Monitoring the Future data show that 1.2 percent of 8th graders, 1.4 percent of 10th graders, and 2.5 percent of 12th graders reported using steroids at least once in their lifetime. A survey sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 3.9 percent of all high school students surveyed in 2007 reported use of steroid pills/shots without a doctor's prescription at some point in their lives. This figure includes 4.8 percent of 9th graders, 3.7 percent of 10th graders, 3.1 percent of 11th graders, and 3.8 percent of 12th graders.

Prescription drug abuse is also high and is increasing. The 2008 Monitoring the Future data indicate that 15.4 percent of 12th graders reported using a prescription drug nonmedically within the past year. Vicodin, an opiate pain reliever, continues to be abused at unacceptably high levels. Many of the drugs used by 12th graders are prescription drugs or, in the case of cough medicine, are available over the counter.
The expectation that they may be randomly tested is enough to make some students stop using drugs.

Despite some declines in drug use, much remains to be done. Youth still face a barrage of media messages and peer pressure that promotes drug use. Random student drug-testing programs are effective prevention strategies to help adolescents refuse drugs, when offered.

**Student Drug Testing**

*How can schools determine if there is a need for a drug-testing program?*

Communities first need to identify their drug problems. This becomes the basis of developing a consensus for student drug testing. Schools must first determine whether there is a need for testing. Such a need can be determined from student drug-use surveys; reports by teachers and other school staff about student drug use; reports about drug use from parents and others in the community; and from discoveries of drugs, drug paraphernalia, or residues at school.

*Is student drug testing a stand-alone solution, or do schools need other programs to prevent and reduce drug use?*

Drug testing should never be undertaken as a stand-alone response to a drug problem. If testing is done, it should be one component of a comprehensive prevention and intervention program in compliance with local, state, and federal laws, with the common goal of reducing students' use of illegal drugs and misuse of prescription drugs.

*What are the benefits of drug testing?*

Drug use can turn into abuse and then into addiction, trapping users in a vicious cycle that can ruin lives and destroy families. Studies have shown drug testing to be an effective tool in preventing student drug use. The expectation that they may be randomly tested is enough to make some students stop using drugs—or never start in the first place. School-based drug testing is also an excellent tool for getting students who use drugs the help they need.

According to the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health students who use drugs are statistically more likely to drop out of school, bring guns to school, steal, and be involved in fighting or other delinquent behavior. Drug abuse not only interferes with a student's ability to learn, it also disrupts the orderly environment necessary for all students to succeed. Obviously, reducing the likelihood of these disruptive behaviors benefits everyone involved in a school environment.

**The Dangers of Teen Drug Use**

*Why are teens particularly vulnerable?*
Teens are especially vulnerable to drug abuse when the brain and body are still developing. Most teens do not use drugs, but for those that do, it can lead to a wide range of adverse effects on the brain, the body, behavior, and health.

**Short term:** Even a single use of an intoxicating drug can affect a person's judgment and decision making—resulting in accidents, poor performance in a school or sports activity, unplanned risky behavior, and the risk of overdosing.

**Long term:** Repeated drug abuse can lead to serious problems, such as poor academic outcomes, mood changes (depending on the drug: depression, anxiety, paranoia, psychosis), and social or family problems caused or worsened by drugs. Repeated drug use can also lead to the disease of addiction. Studies show that the earlier a teen begins using drugs, the more likely he or she will develop a substance abuse problem or addiction. Conversely, if teens stay away from drugs while in high school, they are less likely to develop a substance abuse problem later in life.

## The Research About Student Drug Testing

**What has research determined about the utility of random drug tests in schools?**

There is not very much research in this area and early research shows mixed results. A study published in 2007 found that student athletes who participated in randomized drug testing had overall rates of drug use similar to students who did not take part in the program, and in fact, some indicators of future drug abuse increased among those participating in the drug-testing program.

In another study, Hunterdon Central Regional High School in New Jersey saw significant reductions in 20 of 28 drug-use categories after 2 years of a drug-testing program (e.g., cocaine use by seniors dropped from 13 percent to 4 percent). A third study, from Ball State University, showed that 73 percent of high school principals reported a reduction in drug use among students subjected to a drug-testing policy, but only 2 percent reported an increase. Because of the limited number of studies on this topic, more research is warranted.

**Are there any current randomized control studies about the impact of mandatory random student drug testing on the reduction of student substance use?**

Yes, RMC Research is conducting a national impact evaluation of mandatory random student drug testing. The four-year study is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to assess the effects of school-based mandatory random drug-testing programs. The study population comprises school districts and schools that received grants from the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools to implement mandatory random student drug testing. The study includes the collection of school-level drug testing results and data garnered through student surveys, school-wide record review, and staff interviews. The study, designed as a cluster randomized control trial, is the first of its sort to examine this topic and will contribute to knowledge about the impact of mandatory random student drug testing on the reduction of student substance use. Preliminary results are expected in November 2009. [There are no results yet as of July 2010.]
Student Drug Testing and Legal Matters

*Does the federal government mandate student drug testing?*

No. The federal government recognizes drug testing as one tool that local schools can choose as a component of a broad drug prevention effort. Each school or school district that wants to start a program needs to involve the entire community in determining whether student drug testing is right for their specific situation.

*What have the courts said?*

The Supreme Court of the United States first determined that drug testing of student athletes is constitutional in a June 1995 decision. Voting 6 to 3 in *Vernonia School District v. Acton* the court upheld the constitutionality of a policy requiring student athletes to submit to random drug testing.

In June 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court broadened the authority of public schools to test students for illegal drugs. Voting 5 to 4 in *Board of Education v. Earls*, the court ruled to allow random drug tests for all middle and high school students participating in competitive extracurricular activities. The ruling greatly expanded the scope of school drug testing.

*Just because the U.S Supreme Court ruled that student drug testing for adolescents in competitive extracurricular activities is constitutional, does that mean it is legal in my city or state?*

A school or school district interested in adopting a student drug-testing program should seek legal expertise so that it complies with all federal, state, and local laws. Individual state constitutions and court rulings may dictate different legal thresholds for allowing student drug testing. Communities interested in starting a student drug-testing program should become familiar with the law in their respective states to ensure proper compliance....

**The Consequences of a Positive Drug Test**

*What are the consequences if a student tests positive for drugs in a random drug test?*

The primary purpose of random drug testing is not to punish students who use drugs but to prevent drug dependence and to help drug-dependent students become drug free. Students testing positive may require intervention before they become dependent on drugs. Interventions can include follow-up testing, assessment, counseling, and a referral to a drug treatment program to begin the recovery process. However, a student should not face any academically or legally punitive consequences because of a confirmed positive random test.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that student drug testing is permissible, but must be done confidentially.
If a student tests positive for drugs, are schools responsible for paying for drug treatment?

No; however, well-crafted drug-testing programs will include qualified health and drug treatment professionals to aid in assessing students who test positive. Some parents may be unable to accept their child's use or not know how to help their child. It is important that schools have resources available to help educate parents on the problem and help them choose how to intervene or how to get their child needed professional treatment.

Student Privacy Rights

Is drug testing a violation of students' privacy rights?

This concern usually stems from a misunderstanding of the purpose of student drug testing. Foremost, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that student drug testing is permissible, but must be done confidentially. Schools have a responsibility to respect students' privacy, so it is vital that only the people who need to know the test results see them—parents, the student, and a school administrator, for example. The results should not be shared with anyone else, not even teachers. The purpose is not to expose and punish children for drug use, but to deter use, intervene early with those who have just begun to use, and to provide help to those who have become dependent.

Student drug-testing records should also be kept strictly confidential in accordance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education. Student drug-testing activities are often also covered under the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA)....

The Student Drug-Testing Process

What testing methods are available?

There are several testing methods available for different types of specimens, including urine, hair, oral fluids, and sweat (patch). These methods vary in cost, reliability, drugs detected, and detection period. Schools should determine their needs and choose the method that best suits their requirements, as long as the testing procedures are conducted by a reliable source, such as a certified or nationally accredited drug-testing company or a hospital.

For which drugs can and should students be tested?

Various testing methods normally test for a "panel" of drugs. Typically, a drug panel tests for marijuana, cocaine, opioids, amphetamines, and PCP [phencyclidine]. If a school or community has a particular problem with other drugs, such as tobacco, ecstasy (MDMA), gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB), or steroids, they can include testing for these drugs.
How accurate are drug tests? Is there a possibility a test could give a false positive?

Screening tests are very accurate but not 100 percent accurate. Usually samples are divided so if an initial test is positive, a confirmation test can be conducted.

The Detection of Drugs

Can students "beat" the tests?

Many drug-using students are aware of techniques that supposedly detoxify their systems or mask their drug use. Popular magazines and Internet sites give advice on how to dilute urine samples, and there are even companies that sell drug-free "clean" urine or products designed to distort test results. A number of techniques and products are focused on urine tests for marijuana, but masking products increasingly are becoming available for tests of hair, oral fluids, and multiple drugs.

Most of these products do not work, are very costly, can be identified in the testing process, and must be readily available at the random time of testing. Moreover, even if the specific drug is successfully masked, the masking product itself can be detected, in which case the student using it would become an obvious candidate for additional screening and attention. In fact, some testing programs consider a test "positive" if a masking product is detected.

What about alcohol?

Alcohol is a drug and a serious problem among young people. However, alcohol does not remain in the blood long enough for most tests to detect recent use. Breathalyzers and oral fluid tests can detect current use, and can be used to measure impairment. The ethyl glucuronide (EtG) test can be used to detect recent alcohol use; however, the National Institute on Drug Abuse has questioned the reliability of this test. Adolescents with substance abuse problems are often polydrug users (they use more than one drug), so identifying a problem with an illicit or prescription drug may suggest an alcohol problem.

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals**


• Nancy Gibbs "Birth Control for Kids?" *Time,* October 18, 2007.


• Eric Hartley "Sometimes, Privacy Must Take a Back Seat," *Capital* (Annapolis, MD), June 14, 2009.


• Janet Kornblum and Mary Beth Marklein "What You Say Online Could Haunt You," *USA Today,* March
8, 2006.


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