

Commentary

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Random Drug Testing in Schools Helps, Not Harms, Students: Defining Current Practices and Addressing Concerns

Student drug testing programs continue to thrive in both public and private schools throughout the United States. These programs flourish in public schools thanks to two landmark Supreme Court cases which held constitutional the random testing of public school students participating in athletics¹ and competitive extracurricular activities.² There is no similar constraint for private schools where all students can be tested. Such drug testing programs are non-punitive, and when a student is found to test positive, can lead to counseling and treatment if needed. The goal is to establish drug-free schools where students can reach their full potential. However, the policies, procedures and intentions of student drug testing programs often are misunderstood and are sometimes prohibited by well-meaning advocates for personal choice. Unfortunately the slavery of drug dependence does not result in the freedom that such people espouse.

There are several types of student drug testing. For-cause testing is done when a student is suspected of using or dealing drugs. Another model is random student drug testing (RSDT) which is used as a part of a school's comprehensive drug prevention program in middle and high schools. In RSDT programs, students are randomly tested for the recent use of illegal drugs during normal school hours. The four primary goals of RSDT programs are:

- 1) To deter and prevent drug use
- 2) To reinforce all other prevention efforts
- 3) To identify students who need help getting and staying drug-free
- 4) To prepare students for workplace drug testing

In the typical RSDT program, students who are eligible for testing are randomly selected and individually excused from class for a short period of time. Students are brought to the nurse's office or another appropriate place where they are instructed that they have been randomly selected to be tested on that day. If urine tests are used, the student is given the specimen cup and is asked to provide a sample in a private setting – usually the nurse's bathroom or other school restroom. After completion of the test, the student returns to class. School nurses or Third Party Administrators (TPA) are usually the collectors of specimens. If hair or saliva tests are used, the samples are taken on site. If a sample tests negative for illegal drugs, no other testing takes place on the sample.

A positive drug test is verified by a Medical Review Officer (MRO) who is responsible for reviewing laboratory drug test results and evaluating medical explanations for certain drug tests. Once confirmed as a positive drug test result, the student has an evaluation with a school

counselor. All of these procedures are described in a school's policy handbook, including when parents are notified of a positive test. Results are confidential. Steps taken following a positive, confirmed drug test are in the best interest of helping the student and are non-punitive.

Most of the opposition to RSDT is based on an admirable desire to protect youth with the implicit or explicit concern that a positive drug test would do damage to the students. This concern is commendable but misguided. The standard for handling a positive random drug test does not include notifying police or suspending or expelling students from school. Very few school employees who are on a need-to-know basis are informed of a positive test result. School representatives involve parents and if necessary, provide resources for the student to obtain outside counseling to help the drug-using child become and stay drug-free. The only sanction a student incurs is temporary removal from athletic and/or extracurricular activities until the student can provide a clean drug test result. Student drug test records never leave the school and are destroyed when the student leaves the school.

The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) has worked with many schools with successful RSDT programs. RSDT programs cannot be implemented without the support of the school board as well as key community members including educators and parents. Program policies ensure that student confidentiality is maintained and that students are provided with the resources to remain drug-free.

Not knowing a child is using drugs harms the child and raises the risk of academic failure and dropping out. Identifying drug use with a random drug test does not harm the child. It is the identification and intervention of drug use that keeps students in school and on track with their education.

Individuals who do not understand the fundamentals of RSDT programs naturally oppose random testing of students. They fear that students are put in a spotlight for their drug use and are harmed by schools involving police and/or removing the student from school. This form of drug testing is incomparable with the RSDT that is widely practiced now in the United States and that is strongly supported by IBH.

For more information about the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. and RSDT visit www.ibhinc.org and www.PreventionNotPunishment.org.

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¹ Vernonia School District 47J v. Acton, 1995

² Board of Education of Independent School District No. 92 of Pottawatomie County, et al, Petitioners v. Lindsay Earls et al, 2002