

The School Drug Testing Debate

by Adam Kreitman

To test or not to test? That is the question many schools across the country are debating as the issue of student drug testing gains more and more attention.

Even the Supreme Court has weighed in on the debate. In 1995, the Supreme Court ruled that an Oregon school could conduct random drug testing of student athletes, in part, based on evidence of rampant drug use at the school. The Court broadened the scope of that ruling in a 2002 case by finding that public high schools could conduct mandatory random drug testing of students in all extracurricular activities. The ruling found that the schools' interest in ridding their campuses of drugs outweighed an individual's right to privacy. While the decision did not explicitly give the okay for random testing of any student, several justices have expressed an interest in answering that question in the future.

With the majority of abuse and addiction problems starting between ages 12 and 14, many believe schools are an ideal place to conduct drug testing. Advocates point to a number of reasons why they favor school testing policies. Primarily they see testing as a strong deterrent to drug use by giving kids a reason to say no. If students know they are going to be subject to drug tests, they are more likely to stand up to peer pressure by being able to deflect the basis of their decision from themselves to authority figures. Also, proponents say testing can identify those who are experimenting with drugs or are addicted so they can get the needed intervention and treatment.

Proponents of testing also point to examples showing the positive impacts student drug testing has had on schools. For instance, Indiana schools have found increased graduation rates, improved test scores, and decreased violence rates in schools that have implemented drug testing programs.

Opponents of school drug testing point to the privacy issues concerning the randomness of the testing. They believe that the mandatory random tests deny children the constitutional right of presumption of innocence. Their feeling is that being accused of a crime with no evidence and having to prove your own innocence is a frightening, humiliating, and infuriating prospect for everyone, including adolescents.

Those against school testing also take issue with mandatory random tests that target those in extracurricular activities. Opponents point to studies that demonstrate interest in activities is a strong anti-drug for teenagers. They also claim it has been shown that those with drug addiction tend to withdraw from student society and extracurricular activities. How effective, opponents question, are random drug testing policies that seem to target exactly the wrong group of students?

To better address many of these issues, some schools are turning to a unique technology called DrugWipe. DrugWipe is a handheld "lab-on-a-stick" that tests school owned surfaces for illegal narcotic residue that enters a school either by drug use or drug

trafficking. The device tests for cocaine, cannabis, opiates, and amphetamines (including Meth) and provides results in less than five minutes. It's a single use device, though each DrugWipe can sample up to 40 surfaces at a time. This provides schools with an overall picture of drug activity without using tests that target individual students.

DrugWipe assessments give school administrators an audit capability that lets them quantify their drug problem so they know exactly what they're dealing with. Information from an assessment can be presented to the community and used to develop an effective plan of action.

Some schools use the information mainly to develop drug education and prevention programs that better target the actual problem, not just a perceived one. Other schools use the information to demonstrate the need for a comprehensive drug testing program. Administrators applying for grants to fund these programs could also see a benefit from an independent assessment of drug activity in their school. By having hard data that shows the extent of a school's drug problem, they may have an easier time demonstrating their need for funds in order to implement an effective drug control policy.

Schools that already have a testing program in place take the random factor out of drug testing programs by using DrugWipe to establish "for cause" testing of a student or small group of students. Since the technology also detects residue from trafficking, schools can use it as a means of detecting and deterring the supply-side of the problem.

School drug testing and detection technology like DrugWipe are just a few components of an overall strategy to address the issue of drug use in adolescents. And schools can't shoulder the burden by themselves. They need the help of the entire community – law enforcement, health care workers, and most of all parents. Only by working together and using all available options will we be able to effectively guide our children down the path to a drug-free future.