



IADDA

Random Student Drug Testing
Approved by IADDA Board of Directors
April 14, 2005

Substance abuse professionals have long been aware that proactive intervention with substance users has the potential to decrease or stop use. Random Student Drug Testing is one means of intervention. This is particularly important with young people, as the earlier one intervenes in a young person's use, the better the prospects for success.

In addition to creating a culture of disapproval towards drugs in the communities where it is employed, student drug testing aims to achieve three public health goals: 1) deter children from initiating drug use; 2) identify children who have just started using drugs so that parents and counselors can intervene early; and, 3) help identify children who have a dependency on drugs so that they can be referred to effective drug treatment.

While this rationale could apply to an entire student population, the legal support for random drug testing in public schools is currently most established in regard to participation in extra-curricular activity, which is a voluntary choice. There is a corresponding special interest in testing those who participate in extra-curricular activities. While there is a common notion that participation in extra-curricular activities is protective against substance use, research suggests that the key is for youth to be "bonded" with an organization that espouses and enforces clear norms of being drug-free. In order for extra-curricular activities to have a protective effect, they must indeed be imbued with a substance-free norm. If substance-using students become involved in an extra-curricular activity, and particularly if multiple key leaders in the activity use substances, then participation in the activity may actually lead to greater likelihood of use among other participants.

Irrespective of whether a school conducts random drug testing, there continues to be legal grounds for drug tests to be used in cases of "reasonable suspicion" or in cases in which the young person (if 12 or over) or their parent (for youth under age 18) consents to testing.

Schools that wish to assist in the identification and referral of substance abusing youth should explore a number of issues before enacting a random drug testing initiative. These issues include:

1. The need for testing.
2. Community support for testing.
3. Procedures to be used in testing students.
4. Actions to be taken following a "positive" test (i.e., a test result indicating use)
5. Procedures for beginning a new random testing program

1. The Need for Testing

Most schools do not test for alcohol, even though alcohol is number one drug of abuse for young people. Alcohol tends not to be easily detectable long after use, though new tests to correct this may become practical in the near future. So, if a school has very little substance use other than alcohol, then drug testing may not be the best approach for identification and intervention. If there are other substances being used, schools need to know which ones are common so that the tests selected correspond to those.

The importance of using data to drive the decision of choosing drug testing as an option for a school/community cannot be minimized. Not only does it offer a rationale for the implementation of a testing program, it provides a baseline with which to measure the progress and effectiveness of the program over time.

The best way to obtain this information is through the use of a valid student survey that includes a variety of questions about substance use. In Illinois, the Dept. of Human Services sponsors administration of the Illinois Youth Survey every two years, so there is no cost to schools to participate. Irrespective of whether drug testing is eventually started, the survey can provide an accurate and up-to-date measure of current substance use.

Recommendation: It is not enough to have a general sense that student drug testing sounds like a good idea. Schools must first determine whether there is a real need for testing. Before proceeding far with planning random student drug testing, a school should administer the Illinois Youth Survey or a comparable student survey and study the results, with assistance from prevention professionals.

2. Community Support for Testing

The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) has noted that, “The decision of whether to implement a drug-testing program should not be left to one individual, or even to a school board. It should involve parents and the entire community. Schools considering [random] testing will want plenty of public input. In fact, by making the effort to include everyone, a school can greatly increase its chances of adopting a successful testing program.”

Recommendation: Drug testing should never be undertaken as a stand-alone response to the drug problem. Rather, it should be one component of a broader program, including treatment and prevention, designed to reduce students’ use of illegal drugs. Exploration of random student drug testing should include efforts to solicit parent and other public comment. Concerns should be explored to correct misinformation, as well as to shape ultimate decisions about random student drug testing. Schools and communities should also be aware of the origin of information about RSdT that is offered on the internet. Organizations supporting the legalization of certain illicit drugs often offer opinions on RSdT via informational websites.

3. Procedures to be Used in Testing Students

There are a number of decisions needed to shape the details of a drug testing program. Some of the major ones include what kind of test to use (e.g., saliva, urine, hair), how to select students to be tested (not all eligible students are tested at the same time), who will conduct the tests, how to protect the confidentiality of test results, and what to do if a student refuses to participate. Decisions should be guided by a number of criteria including fairness, practicality, maximizing validity, minimizing invasiveness, and matching costs to available funding.

Recommendation: Initial exploration of random student drug testing, after student survey results are studied but before much further consideration, should include plans for how the testing system would be carried out in a fair and effective but minimally invasive manner. These plans can be changed, but should be begun early in order to respond to community questions about the specifics of a random student drug testing program. It is recommended that schools interested in pursuing testing also contact their local treatment provider for more information on testing methods, costs, and other considerations. (To find out where a treatment provider is located, please contact IADDA at 217.528.7335) Prior to implementation, it is also recommended that the school develop a financial plan for the program.

4. Actions to be Taken Following a “Positive” Test

In the absence of an effective way to respond to students whose tests indicate drug use, a testing program may do harm. Policies, procedures and intervention resources need to be in place before any program is begun. Policies need to be explicit and fair in terms of the impact of one or more positive tests on extra-curricular eligibility. Policies about random student test results should be consistent with other substance abuse policies, such as the effect of being caught in possession of substances.

Before implementing a drug-testing program, schools, parents and communities must make sure appropriate resources are in place to deal with students who test positive. One good way to coordinate the random student drug testing program and assure that students receive the appropriate level of counseling or treatment is by utilizing a student assistance program. Some schools use a core team of trained staff, a single counselor, or contract with a qualified outside agency to provide student assistance services. A student assistance program operates in much the same way as an employee assistance program in the workplace. Substance abuse specialists should be available to determine the nature and extent of the drug use, and there should be comprehensive treatment services for students with potentially serious drug problems. Schools need to educate parents about exactly what the drug tests are measuring and what to do if their child tests positive. It is vital for parents to know that resources are available to help them gauge the extent of their child’s drug use and, if necessary, find drug treatment. All referral processes should be clearly articulated in school policies.

Recommendations: Policies need to be explicit and fair in terms of the impact of one or more positive tests on extra-curricular eligibility. Procedures should include a second, confirming test when positive results are found, and opportunity for students, parents and the student’s physician to offer any explanation for results, particularly use of a relevant prescription medication. Qualified and sufficient intervention resources, including, but not limited to licensed treatment providers, should be available and communicated to school personnel involved in the administration of testing. The procedures for accessing resources should be made clear to students who test positive as well as their parents. Any drug testing program undertaken should be implemented with fidelity and consistency. We strongly recommend consulting with an attorney to review the legalities of all sanctions.

5. Procedures for Beginning a New Random Testing Program

Schools that decide to implement a random student drug testing program should be careful to avoid two potential errors:

- a. Drug testing should not replace effective prevention efforts already in place, nor should it preclude pursuit of new prevention efforts, particularly those that are shown by research to be effective and cost-efficient.
- b. The initiation of a drug testing program shouldn’t be a surprise to students and parents.

Recommendations: Prevention efforts that can demonstrate success should be seen as necessary components of a comprehensive effort that includes drug testing, rather than alternatives to testing or vice-versa. Drug testing and intervention programs should not be expected to replace treatment services in youth who need such services. Policies that are part of a new drug testing program should be announced to students, parents, and teachers at least 90 days before testing begins, and parents and teachers should be asked to return a signed statement declaring that they understand the policies. Like any prevention effort, schools that use random drug testing to deter use should plan an annual evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the program and make changes as necessary.

Conclusion: Random student drug testing has the potential to significantly enhance the capacity of schools to identify and intervene with youth substance use. It may also deter use and ensure the existence of a clear drug-free norm among those involved in extra-curricular activities. Like any new realm of action, it requires careful study and proper implementation in order to be effective and minimize the chance of unintended negative effects. Schools that invest the effort in due consideration of whether and how to carry out a drug testing program and who work constructively with community prevention, intervention, and treatment resources are likely to attain lower drug use rates and improved outcomes for those who are found to have used drugs.

For further information:

Office of National Drug Control Policy (www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov) publication titled *What You Need to Know About Starting a Student Drug-Testing Program* (Publication available also by calling 1-800-666-3332)

Illinois Alcoholism and Drug Dependence Association (www.iadda.org)

Institute for Behavior and Health resource website (www.preventionnotpunishment.org)

National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) at www.niaaa.nih.gov

National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) at www.nida.nih.gov

National Student Assistance Association (www.nsaa.us) and their publication *Understanding the Connection: Student Assistance Programs and Random Student Drug Testing* (800-257-6310)

National Student Drug Testing Coalition web site (www.studentdrugtesting.org)

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) at www.health.org (1-800-729-6686) and their clearinghouse <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov>