



1623 Connecticut Avenue NW; Suite 300
Washington, DC 20009
Phone: (202) 293-4414
Fax: (202) 293-8344
Web: www.SchoolsNotPrisons.com
Blog: www.DAREgeneration.com

Eliminate the Harmful and Costly Student Drug Testing Grants

President Bush has requested \$17.9 million in FY2008 to fund the Office of National Drug Control Policy and Department of Education's random suspicionless student drug testing grants program. While proponents of testing claim that it keeps teens away from drugs, research shows that the practice fails to reduce youth drug use and can actually make existing school drug problems worse. Drug testing students is also very expensive and invasive.

What's Wrong With Drug Testing Students?

It is ineffective

A 2003 study funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse – the largest of its kind – examined 94,000 students at 900 schools in the U.S. and found no difference between levels of drug use at schools that test their students and those that do not. The study concluded, “[S]chool drug testing was not associated with either the prevalence or frequency of student marijuana use, or of other illicit drug use.” Dr. Lloyd Johnston, one of the three University of Michigan researchers who conducted the study, commented, “[Drug testing is] the kind of intervention that doesn't win the hearts and minds of children. I don't think it brings about any constructive changes in their attitudes about drugs or their belief in the dangers associated with using them.”

It is harmful

In addition to being ineffective, there is evidence suggesting drug testing actually exacerbates the problem of teen drug abuse. Because most schools that test do so as a condition of participating in extra-curricular activities, at-risk students may be deterred from getting involved in such activities rather than from using drugs. Research shows that teen drug use and other dangerous behavior is highest between 3:00 and 6:00 PM – the unsupervised hours between the end of the school day and the time parents get home from work. As a result, those who choose not to submit to drug tests sacrifice extracurricular involvement and are at greater risk of abusing drugs or engaging in other dangerous behavior. According to Dr. Howard Taras, chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, “[Drug testing] may decrease involvement in extracurricular activities among students who regularly use or have once used drugs. Without engagement in healthy activities, adolescents are more likely to drop out of school, become pregnant, join gangs, pursue substance abuse and engage in other risky behaviors.”

In addition, students may turn to more dangerous but less detectable drugs in order to avoid testing positive. Reasoning that marijuana is the most detectable drug, students may be driven to use other “harder” drugs, like meth, ecstasy, inhalants, or cocaine, which are far less detectable. False positives – when drug tests erroneously reveal drug use in students who have not used drugs – are relatively common, leading to the improper punishment of innocent students.

It is expensive

With costs ranging between \$10 and \$75 per test, it is unconscionable for federal dollars to be earmarked for a program of questionable effectiveness while schools struggle to adequately pay teachers and fund valuable extracurricular programs. One school in Dublin, Ohio, for example, canceled its \$35,000 per year drug testing program after determining it was not cost-effective. Of 1,473 students tested at \$24 each, 11 tested positive, for a total cost of \$3,200 per “positive”

student. After canceling the program, the school used the savings to hire a full-time counselor and provided prevention programs that reached all 3,581 students.

It is invasive and damages important student-educator relationships

Many schools that drug test require students to produce urine samples while school officials stand outside the door listening for the sounds of urination to guard against tampered specimens. In addition to putting school officials at risk of being sued for sexual assault, this is invasive and embarrassing for students, and sends the message that they are guilty until proven innocent. Students need to know that they can go to school officials for help if they have problems with drugs, but random suspicionless testing poisons important relationships of trust between students and educators and makes it less likely that alienated adolescents will seek help when they need it.

In the event of positive test results, schools often ask students to provide lists of prescription and over-the-counter medications they are taking in order to ascertain whether or not those drugs may have produced a false positive. This means that students taking birth control or antidepressants may be forced to disclose this information to school officials.

Most educators and substance abuse experts reject it as an effective tool for prevention

According to the 2003 NIDA study, 95 percent of American schools do not randomly drug test their student athletes, and only two percent of schools randomly test students who participate in extracurriculars other than athletics. Prominent organizations that oppose random suspicionless student drug testing include the National Education Association, the Association for Addiction Professionals, the American Public Health Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Association of Social Workers, and the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence.

There are remaining concerns about its legality

While the Supreme Court narrowly ruled (by a 5-4 margin) in 2002 that schools can require students involved in competitive extracurricular activities to submit to drug tests, it is important to note that the Court's ruling on the constitutionality of student drug testing only interpreted federal law. Many state laws and constitutions provide additional protections for student privacy. In fact, lawsuits have been filed against school districts in several states over their student drug testing policies. This means that schools electing to drug test their students are subject to tremendous legal liability. Laws vary greatly from state to state, and in the absence of state court decisions upholding drug testing, school districts run the serious risk of financial ruin in the event of a lawsuit, even when successfully defended. Even in cases where drug testing is legally permissible, the mere appearance of mishandling sensitive medical information or misconduct in administering the tests can invite litigation. This increases the actual cost of drug testing programs due to the need to hire attorneys to ensure legal compliance and to purchase tort insurance to protect against potential lawsuits.

How the ONDCP/DOE Grants Work

In 2006, ONDCP/DOE granted money to 66 school districts with 362 schools, each grant averaging approximately \$125,000. The schools must include in the random testing pool all students who participate in athletic programs and/or all who are engaged in competitive extracurricular school-sponsored activities.

Solution: Cut Funding from the Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations Bill

There are many deserving programs that are under-funded, yet are actually effective at keeping teens healthy and out of trouble. Such programs that the president has suggested eliminating include the Mental Health Integration in Schools Program, the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program, Mentoring Programs, and the School Dropout Prevention Program.

For more information, please contact Tom Angell with Students for Sensible Drug Policy at (202) 293-4414 or tom@ssdp.org, or visit <http://www.SchoolsNotPrisons.com>.