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THE STUDENT DRUG-TESTING COALITION
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PROGRAMS AND STRATEGIES TO PREVENT AND REDUCE DRUG USE



**Overview of the random drugs testing programme at Abbey School,
Faversham, Kent, England
December 2004**

I have been Headteacher at Abbey School since January 1987, bringing to that appointment a long-term and dedicated interest in the personal and social education of students. In 1991 I was invited to give evidence on drugs to a Home Office Working Party Committee. Soon after, I was invited to become a member of a Parliamentary Working Party on the Misuse of Drugs. I served the maximum time allowed on this Committee and, under the Nolan ruling, I left this august body in 2001, but I still maintain my interest in drugs education. By this time, I had taken on a trusteeship for Re-Solv where I remain a trustee. This organisation is a society dedicated to the prevention of solvent and volatile substance abuse.

Given the brief detail of my background in this area, it came as no surprise that, in February 2004 when new drugs guidance was issued by the DfES, coupled with the fact that Tony Blair made a strongly supportive statement, I was asked to respond to media comments by Kent County Council's (KCC) press office. My response was: "perhaps the time is right for the introduction of random drugs testing in schools". That response became the catalyst to initiate the process for introducing random drugs testing at Abbey School.

Knowing the topic to be fraught with difficulties, almost like walking in a minefield, a thoughtfully planned strategy was developed. Consideration was given to child protection issues as well as the Children's Act and Human Rights Act. The views of parents and their children needed to be carefully considered. Before any communication was made with parents, the Governing Body were informed about the project and kept informed every step of the way. They, as well as I, have had to withstand criticism regarding the scheme and I am eternally grateful to them for their support. In March 2004, parents were sent a letter outlining the Random Drugs Testing Project and welcoming their views on whether or not to introduce the system into Abbey School. Staff and students in school were also asked for their views. The responses to those communications indicated that the idea needed to be taken further. There was only one negative response received to the proposed drugs-testing program amongst many positive responses.

The only question needing an answer from the students' point of view was: "Are staff going to be involved?" However, by the time this question was asked, a number of staff, both teaching and non-

teaching, had already asked for the opportunity to take part in the scheme. The decision was made at that time to allow the proposed drugs-testing programme to be open to everybody who worked at the school. It would not be compulsory and I would not insist that staff take part, particularly as some of the professional associations were advising caution.

The next step was to seek legal opinion and advice from KCC support groups. Additionally, considerable time was spent researching the different methods of testing, making cost comparisons, etc. Ultimately, it was decided to use the services of Altrix Healthcare UK, based in Warrington, working directly with Chris Snelson, Director of Operations for Altrix. The next step was to seek sponsors for the costs of the drugs-testing programme. Sponsorship was obtained from *The News of the World* and included the costs of training and certification of Abbey School staff designated to administer the tests, the testing kits and the laboratory specimen-testing process.

In November 2004, a letter was sent to parents outlining details of the scheme that was planned to run until the end of the 2005 Summer term, including the method and type of testing and advising them what would happen in the event of a positive test result. This letter included a return slip for parents to complete, either agreeing to or refusing permission for their child to be tested. There was no undue pressure to decide one way or another. Of the 921 letters sent, there have been 714 replies as of the time of this report. Of these replies, more than 85% of parents have said “yes” to their child taking part and fewer than 15% have said “no”. This represents a 77½% return rate and, even if the remaining 207 parents who have not replied said “no”, there would still be a 66.1% positive indication of support. Further to this, 43 of the staff employed at Abbey School have indicated that they wish to participate in the scheme as well. Such strong support from parents is heart-warming for me and I am extremely touched by the high volume of support from the staff.

Following the scheme’s inception, the programme is to be managed internally by the school’s Student Guidance Manager, Mrs Lesley Temple. The Headteacher is responsible for all external issues. The scheme operates as follows:

- 1) Each week 20 names are drawn at random from the computerised student database.
- 2) Before any testing is done, these names are checked against the consent list.
- 3) If consent has been given, the students are given a slip advising them when their test will be taking place and asking them to go to the Student Guidance Room, a comfortably appointed room.
- 4) When the student arrives, the most important question asked is whether or not they agree to being tested. If they do not agree, they will not be tested. If they give consent, the specimen collection is carried out.
- 5) Once the specimen has been collected, the testing personnel complete the required paperwork and the swabs are sent to Altrix for analysis.
- 6) The results are expected back to the school within 3 working days and once these have arrived, parents are informed of the results.

If a student refuses to be tested, this is the point where the Headteacher becomes involved. Parents are contacted to come into school to discuss the issue in the presence of the student. The student is asked why the test was refused even though the parents have given permission. It may be that the

student had a good reason for not wanting to take the test. Whatever the reason, the goal is to come to some agreement with the student and parents about where to go from that point. If the student has a change of mind and agrees to be tested, then the collection will take place. If the parents think that there is a possibility that the reason for the test refusal is that the student has been taking drugs, then a determination is made on how to best support the student. Punitive measures are not used, as the two main priorities for the scheme are to improve prevention levels and to improve the quality of life for students inside school.

Once a student has agreed to be tested, they are asked to pick a test pack for use. Testing personnel then check the date of the pack and ensure that it is still sealed. The student is asked if they have eaten anything during the last 10 minutes and if they have taken any medication during the last 7 days. If the latter applies, then all medications are listed, including paracetamol, cough medicines etc. The student is then asked to read the declaration and sign the consent. A swab is offered to the student who then rubs it against the inside of the cheek on one side of the mouth. The swab is then held in the mouth for two minutes. This procedure is repeated with a second swab on the other side of the mouth. While this is being done, the student signs and dates the security seal for the test tubes. The swabs are then placed in separate test tubes, which are bar coded and placed in vials. The relevant paperwork is completed and bar coded by the testing staff and placed in the envelope provided together with the two samples. The samples are then collected by courier and sent to Altrix.

The test results should be received in school within two or three working days. Should a test prove to be positive, the parents of the student concerned are immediately invited into school to see the Headteacher. Once they have arrived, the student is sent for and informed of the positive result in the presence of the parents. Discussion ensues between the student, the parents and the Headteacher. The first aim is to establish that the student had taken the drug, the second aim is to establish why the drug had been taken e.g. peer pressure, environmental reasons, social or recreational reasons, and the final aim is to agree upon the appropriate form of support. There would certainly be no discussion on punishment; this is not what the scheme is about. The support could be counselling with Abbey School's own Counsellor, counselling sessions externally with support groups such as the Kent Council on Addiction, the police support programmes or the intervention of Social Services. Support will be whatever is deemed the most appropriate in terms of supporting the student to lead as healthy a life as possible. Should what the student has to say give information which identifies dealers or pushers then, with the permission of the student and parents, this information will be passed on to the police. Once again, punishment is not applicable to the student and exclusion will not ensue.

With regard to the test results, only the student, the parents and the Headteacher will know of a positive-test result. The only other person who may know test results will be the Deputy Head during the times when deputising for the Headteacher's absence. Every effort is made to ensure that the matter is kept confidential. Positive-test results will not be identified to anyone except to those referenced above.

An informational data report will be produced, for public consumption, to include information such as how many names have been drawn at random, how many student tests have been conducted, number of staff tested, how many tests results were positive and any other relevant information. Along with drugs-testing programme data, school records on attendance levels, truancy rates, internal academic results, external academic results and behaviour records of students will be examined. Where appropriate, comments on statistical information will be made. These reports will be made available to parents and staff prior to public release.

As a means to measure the impact of the drugs-testing programme, case studies will be made on six students from each academic year group. Every half-term, records for these students as regards attendance, truancy, academics, behaviours, teacher comments etc. will be examined and compared to see if there are any discernible changes in school performance. At the end of the 6-month period, it is anticipated that any significant change or the absence of change, will be ascertainable. If it can be shown that the experiment has identified significant changes in the form of improvements in a student's school performance between the start and finish of the project, then the programme will no longer be experimental and will continue at the school. If there are no discernible benefits, then that will be the end of random drugs testing in Abbey School. In the meantime, steps to making financial provision for the scheme within the school's budget are being taken. Further sponsorship is also being sought. To date, there has been no financial cost to the school whatsoever.

It is interesting to note that many students within the school are now heard saying: "Well I am not going to take any drugs because as my luck would have it will be my turn next to be tested." When one examines this kind of statement further, one realises that in many cases the young person is using that as an excuse to resist pressures from within their peer group to take drugs. It is probably too early to say, but it may be that young people are thinking that now they have a valid way of saying "no" to using drugs with their peers without losing face.

When asked if Abbey School has a big drugs problem, the response is always to provide the facts of drugs use by adolescents. In studies made, 10% of all 11 year olds have said that they have taken drugs and, depending upon which study you read, 50% of all 15 year olds have tried some form of drugs. On this basis alone, all secondary schools in the UK have a problem. Abbey School, therefore, is no different. However, it could well be that Abbey School has less of a problem as it is pro-active in this area.

The Random Drugs Testing Programme has attracted tremendous attention, not just from within school and the UK. Enquiries have been received from many different parts of the world and there have been numerous requests for information about the scheme. There has been very little negative response and, from the positive responses, there has been untold interest in the Abbey School programme. Notably, some of the interest has been from influential politicians.

There is no intention in this article to influence any other schools. It is presented only to inform about the main programme components to interested parties. Please remember that the goal of this programme is to benefit the students through improving prevention levels and the quality of life for all of Abbey School's students.

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