

The Student Drug-testing Coalition

a project of the
Drug-Free Projects Coalition, Inc.

programs and strategies to prevent and reduce drug use



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Unlocking the Potential

Random drug testing works for this New Jersey high school - along with a strong student assistance program for referrals.

By Lisa Brady

This article is about a successful random drug-testing program at Hunterdon Central High School in Flemington, New Jersey. As principal of Hunterdon, I'm sharing it as a response to a commentary that appeared in the Winter 2002 issue of this magazine ("Considering Student Drug Testing"). In it, author Isabel Burk gave reasons why a drug testing program may not be effective or desirable.

This article shows how a random drug-testing program can be both. You'll also learn that it's been very challenging to maintain it, even with the strong support of a majority of students and parents. We've had legal challenges to the program that landed our case in the New Jersey Supreme Court.

However, after implementing Hunterdon's program, student drug use was dramatically reduced. That fact has been inspiring enough to help us remain committed to the program even in the face of legal challenges.

Students who test positive do get help with their personal challenges. They are referred to Hunterdon's core-team model student assistance program (SAP). Let it be said right up front that schools with inadequate or non-existent SAPs should not be considering the implementation of student random drug-testing programs. I repeat, the existence of a student random drug-testing program without adequate referral support from a solid SAP is, quite simply, a bad idea. It is imperative that help be offered to students identified positive for drug use through drug testing. It also is critical to both the success of the drug-testing program and the SAP that the SAP not be perceived as "drug police," but rather as the helping hand offered after a student is identified through drug testing as someone who needs it.

The Hunterdon model

The Hunterdon Central experience provides an excellent case study of how well student random drug testing can work in conjunction with an adequately funded and staffed program of student assistance.

This is how our program works: Each week, on Mondays and on one randomly chosen additional day, a total of seven students are selected through a computer program for testing. Their parents are contacted and

informed that their child has been randomly selected for drug screening.

A vice-principal checks each student's schedule for the least disruptive time to bring the student to the health office for the screening. Our nurses read from a prepared script in order to ensure that everyone's experience is procedurally identical.

Since our switch from urinalysis to oral fluid collection for the random testing program, the entire process is completed in less than 10 minutes, including swabs for both illegal drugs and alcohol.

Each test costs \$30, which includes the oral swab device. It also covers laboratory tests, including the initial and confirmatory test and review of the results by a medical review officer.

All of the tested students are athletes, involved in some type of extracurricular activity or in possession of a valid campus parking permit. In addition, about 5% of the 1,700 students in the testing pool have volunteered to be part of the program without being involved in any of the above activities. They, along with their parents, have previously signed consent forms agreeing to the testing as a requirement for participation.

The students are generally unconcerned about their selection but eager for the process to be completed.

At our school, students who test positive are temporarily removed from sports or extracurricular activities or have their parking permits temporarily revoked. They receive counseling and must attend four after-school drug education programs conducted by our student assistance counselors.

At Hunterdon Central, we employ the services of three full time student assistance counselors in addition to three guidance counselors at each grade level. These positions are funded by our Board of Education. We have two youth-based services counselors who provide counseling in conjunction with our local medical center. These counselors work in the school but are not employed by it. Their salaries are provided by the State of New Jersey in conjunction with Hunterdon Medical Center.

We address the issues of alcohol and substance abuse through a strong, integrated curricular approach. In addition, we use a vigorous and aggressive approach to under-suspicion drug testing as mandated by New Jersey law and train all staff to identify and report any student who may be under the influence or need referral for substance abuse counseling services.

Students are not suspended as a result of a positive test, and nothing is put into their record. When a subsequent drug test comes up negative, they can resume sports and activities and have their parking reinstated.

If a test is positive the second time, the same policy applies again. We've never had a third positive test, but if we did, it would be considered a more serious situation. We would still operate in a helping mode, however, and require more intensive intervention. Previously tested positive students also are subject to periodic testing which is not random.

Program history and rationale

As the principal of this large, suburban high school of 2,600 students, I have both administrated and implemented the random drug-testing program. I have witnessed the change in both the school climate as it relates to drug use and the positive impact it has had on the entire student population.

Our Board of Education, empowered by the US Supreme Court decision in the landmark case of Vernonia School District v. Acton in 1995, courageously acknowledged an alarming pattern of drug use among its students and instituted a policy requiring random drug testing for all students involved in athletics.

The board was prompted to take this aggressive approach armed with data collected in the spring of 1997 through administration of the American Drug and Alcohol Survey. It confirmed their worst fears. According to the survey, more than a third of Hunterdon Central students grades 10 to 12 had used marijuana, and more than 10% had used hallucinogens. In addition, 12% of sophomores had used stimulants, 12% of juniors also had used hallucinogens and 13% of seniors had used cocaine. The survey also revealed that a substantial portion of students perceived that illegal drugs were readily available, including 38% of seniors who reported that heroin was readily available. In a school of 2,600 students, the numbers added up to a lot of kids and a lot of drugs.

From September 1997 through August 2000, Hunterdon Central conducted a successful student random drug-testing program of students involved in athletics. Survey results from a follow-up administration of the American Drug and Alcohol Survey in the fall of 1999 indicated a remarkable decrease in drug use among the student population. Except for the introduction of the random drug-testing program, no other changes to the district's drug and alcohol program had occurred. A careful comparison of the 1997 and 1999 surveys demonstrated that drug use was down in 20 of the 28 categories. The survey also revealed, however, that use of alcohol, marijuana, cocaine and other drugs was still unacceptably high. In addition, parents, students and community members had made their opinions clear regarding the testing program being exclusively for athletes. They said an expansion of the program would be "more fair."

Based on a decision rendered by an Indiana court in the case of *Todd v. Rush County Schools* in 1998, the Board of Education voted to expand the policy in February 2000 to include students involved in extracurricular activities. The program now includes students involved in extracurricular activities as well as students who possess parking permits to drive and park on school property.

Effects of legal challenges

In August 2000, the school became the target of a law suit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) on behalf of three students and their families who believed that the random drug testing policy was a violation of their Fourth Amendment right to suspicionless searches.

During the months that the case was being considered by a lower court in Somerset County, the school ceased the random testing program but began to experience a rapid increase in problems associated with school sponsored activities. For the first time in three years, students were found intoxicated on school overnight trips both in the United States and abroad. In addition, there was an alarming increase in the use of marijuana by student athletes as was reported by the student athletes themselves.

Although the school random drug testing policy was initially found to be unconstitutional at the lower court level, an appellate court upheld the case in July 2002, and our school re-implemented the program in December 2002. The case is currently being appealed by the ACLU to the New Jersey Supreme Court and oral arguments were heard in mid-February. A decision is expected after this magazine goes to press. [Editor's note: Ruling in *Joye v. Hunterdon Central Bd. of Educ.* A-27-2002 was issued July 2003 in favor of Hunterdon Central's student drug-testing program.]

The case involving Hunterdon Central is being closely watched by many school districts in New Jersey and nationally. They stand poised to consider random drug testing if Hunterdon Central is given a green light by the New Jersey Supreme Court. According to the National School Board Association, more than 750 schools are randomly testing and the numbers are increasing since the federal court ruling in June.

In addition, two large studies, one in Indiana and one in Oregon have posted positive results with students being randomly tested for drugs. A year-long pilot study of two Oregon high schools conducted at Oregon

Health and Sciences University found that students subjected to random drug testing were four times less likely to use drugs than their non-tested peers. In the study, student athletes at Wahtonka High School were subjected to random drug testing while students at Warrenton High School were not tested. At the end of the year, of the 135 athletes randomly tested at Wahtonka, 5.3% said they were using illegal drugs. At Warrenton, 19.4% of 141 athletes made this claim. In addition, student athletes at Wahtonka were three times less likely than their peers at Warrenton to say they used performance-enhancing substances.

In Indiana, principals were surveyed and asked to compare drug and alcohol activity during the 1999-2000 school year - when drug testing policies were in effect - with the 2000-2001 school year - when schools were not allowed to continue with their random drug testing policies. Eighty-five percent of high school principals reported an increase in either illegal drug or alcohol use among their students after the drug testing program was stopped.

At Hunterdon Central, over the three years that our program was suspended, student drug use among the highest risk category - multi-drug users - skyrocketed to increases of 316% for 9th graders, 100% for 10th graders, an increase of 52% for juniors and 209% for seniors. These results signaled a devastating back slide from the progress we had made during our three years of successful testing.

In June 2002, the United States Supreme Court delivered its ruling in favor of student random drug testing. Upholding an Oklahoma school's drug-testing program that permitted the random testing of students involved in athletics and extracurricular activities, the federal court decided that the health and safety of schools and students outweighed an individual student's minimal privacy interest when it comes to drug testing. *Tecumseh, Oklahoma BOE v. Earls* hails a landmark victory for schools and communities who are using drug testing to protect all students against the dangers of drug use.

Hunterdon is one of those schools, and we have the data to prove it works for us.

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