COMMENTARY

“Study Finds No Sign That Testing Deters Students’ Drug Use”
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The study featured in the article: “Relationship between student illicit drug use and school drug-testing policies” By Yamaguchi, Royoko, Johnston, Lloyd D and O’Malley, Patrick M. Published American School Health Association Journal of School Health. April 1, 2003

The research on student drug testing reported in “Study Finds No Sign That Testing Deters Students’ Drug Use,” on page one, May 17, 2003, made an important point, a point that is completely overlooked in the New York Times article. The authors compared the drug-using rates of students in the 8th, 10th and 12th grades of a sample of 722 of the nation’s middle schools and high schools during the years from 1998 to 2001. These schools were dichotomized based on each school principal’s answer to this question: “In the school year, did your school test any students for illicit drug use?” About 18% of the schools said “yes” and 82% said “no.” Those schools which said “yes” were further subdivided into schools that conducted either random testing or “suspicion-based” testing. Principals were asked which groups of students at their schools were tested: students participating on an athletic team, students in other extracurricular activities, selected students based on suspicion or cause, students on school probation, students who volunteered to be tested, all students, and “other.” Principals checked as many of those categories as applied to the drug tests conducted each year at their schools. Then the principals were asked to describe the reasons for drug testing at their school
with these options: based on suspicion or cause, routine drug testing, students or their parents volunteered, mandated testing, and “other.”

Data was obtained about the size of the school, the grades covered in the school, the population density of the area served by the school, the social class of the students and a variety of other measures of the school population.

Then the drug use rates were compared in 18% of the schools reporting that they tested “any students for illicit drug use” with 82% of the schools that said they did not. The result was that there was no consistent difference between the schools that did test and those that did not. Not only is it not surprising that no difference in drug use rates was found between these two heterogeneous groups, but it is almost inconceivable that there would be any difference based on this question since there is no assessment of how many drug tests were done at each school or whether there was any sort of student drug testing program underway at each school or not. A school that did a single drug test in a year would be included in the “yes” along with a school that had a comprehensive drug prevention program that included carefully-structured student drug testing.

If the study had ended at that point then there would be no complaint and no story for the New York Times. However, that was not the end of this sad example of the reckless misuse of survey data. The study contained this obligatory disclaimer, “This study explored the association between student drug use and drug-testing policies in schools. While lack of evidence for the effectiveness of drug testing is not definitive, results suggest that drug testing in schools may not provide a panacea for reducing student drug use as some (including some on the Supreme Court) had hoped.” This is the point of this study: When all the schools that did any drug testing at all were compared to the schools that did not, there was no consistent difference in rates of student drug use found between the two groups of schools.

No one that I know has ever claimed that student drug testing is “a panacea for reducing student drug use” or even that student drug testing alone made a sensible, let alone an ideal, drug prevention program for any school. The policy question facing schools today is whether
adding well-structured, non-punitive student drug testing deters illegal drug use and helps parents and students find and use effective help earlier in the cycle of drug dependence. This study failed to address this important question.

The *New York Times* headline made clear just how far from this terribly limited data the quoted experts, including one of the authors of the study, have strayed. This study is the equivalent of taking a sample of all of the patients in the country over a year, who took one dose of a blood pressure medicine compared to patients who took no medicine and, finding no difference in the blood pressures in the two groups, concluding that antihypertensive treatments do not work. To compound the problem of the study’s inadequate design, the article quotes experts who concluded from this study that drug education (not student drug testing) “is the most effective weapon against substance abuse.” Do the researchers at the University of Michigan think that if they compared a sample of all of the schools in the country reporting that they are doing any sort of drug education with all the schools reporting that they are not, that such a study would be a reasonable test of drug education?

What is needed is a controlled study comparing student drug use rates in schools using several different, adequately implemented, student drug testing approaches with schools that do not do student drug testing while both groups of schools use standard drug education approaches. A well-designed study would not only show whether drug testing works to reduce student drug use, but it would show which of the several different approaches to student drug testing is the most cost-effective. Such studies are not difficult to do, but they require careful characterization of the specific student drug testing programs followed by linking those specific programs to the rates of drug use in those schools before and after the student drug testing programs.

The best study design that could establish whether a student drug testing produced a deterrent effect would be a randomized experimental design or an examination of longitudinal results from a “natural experiment” (such as studying the same school over time, before and after student drug testing). This study did neither. Instead, it was a simple “cross-sectional” design that merely compared schools to each other in two meaningless categories – those whose principals said “yes” and those whose said “no” to that single, simplistic question.
Three recent examples of studies which have captured the effectiveness of student drug testing are the New Jersey study\(^3\), the Indiana study\(^4\), and the Oregon study\(^5\). These three studies examined specific school drug testing programs and their effects on the drug use rates in those schools both before and after the implementation of the SDT program. All showed that student drug testing reduced student drug use, as did the pilot study done by the Institute for Behavior and Health (IBH) for the U.S. Department of Education\(^6\).

In addition to the reduction in student drug use, IBH’s pilot study revealed yet another striking and important finding:

“All of the SDT programs were based upon a health and safety rationale, with the purpose of prevention rather than punishment. In every school surveyed the SDT program was just one part of a larger, comprehensive initiative to keep students safe from drugs.”

Having this as an underlying principle for all SDT programs can provide for a good foundation on which schools can build and implement an effective and comprehensive SDT program.

The study described in the *New York Times* article was not able to produce a clear and decisive finding on the effectiveness of student drug testing. A relevant national study is what is needed to have an impact on the policy decision facing schools across the country. The US Supreme Court has found in two landmark cases that mandatory, random drug testing in public school passes Constitutional muster. There never was a Constitutional question about private schools conducting drug tests or about “for-cause” drug testing in public schools. The only legal issue before the Supreme Court has been whether public schools could require large groups of students to take random drug tests without individualized suspicion that the students to be tested were drug abusers. So far the answer to that question has been “yes,” if the tests are well-structured, health-orientated and reasonably administered.

Posing the policy question for schools today as if the schools faced a choice of either drug education or student drug testing, as the study and the *New York Times* article does, poses a false choice. No one has claimed that student drug testing alone is the magic bullet to reduce the
lamentably high levels of teenage drug use in the United States or that drug education is not effective. The question is this, “Does a well-designed student drug testing program enhance other school and community efforts to reduce teenage drug use?”

Drug testing has been successfully used for decades in drug treatment, the criminal justice system and in the workplace. Testing linked to consequences clearly does deter drug use in every setting where it has been studied. Hundreds of schools in the US have begun pioneering efforts to add student drug testing to their comprehensive efforts to reduce teenage drug use. The study reported in this article does a disservice to this important effort, an effort which holds the promise of dramatically reducing the recruitment of new users of illegal drugs in this country, most of whom are teenagers in schools.

What is needed today is a thorough and fair test of a wide variety of student drug testing programs to help schools find the most cost effective ways to prevent the tragically high rate of student use of illegal drugs. The study in the American School Health Association Journal of School Health and the article in the New York Times will not further this important work because they purport to answer the policy question with data that is completely inadequate to support the policy positions taken by the experts quoted in the article and by the means in which the article itself is written.

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References


4 The Effectiveness of Legality of Random Drug Testing Policies. Joseph R. McKinney, J.D., Ed.D., Chair and Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, Ball State University adjunct Professor of Law, Indiana University-Bloomington School of Law. Available at: http://www.studentdrugtesting.org/Effectiveness.htm
