

Student random drug-testing prevention programs: do these programs work?

By C. E. Edwards

Designing and conducting long-term scientifically-valid studies on student random-testing programs has proven to be complicated and expensive. Results of various studies are continually questioned and data, even within single studies, is sometimes conflicting and confounding. Data from self-reporting drug use surveys have demonstrated less drug use once a program is implemented. While considered reliable, survey data has been questioned in spite of validity checks present in survey instruments. Data from student drug-test results have demonstrated decreases in drug use as positive test results decline over time. Such results, while encouraging and valuable for trending purposes, have limitations in that test results do not provide definitive answers as to why positive-test rates decline.

Another form of evidence is derived from what those with student random drug-testing *experience* have to say about the programs. What does the experience of student random drug-testing programs add to the evidence that answers the question: “do these programs work?”

Quite a lot as it turns out.

The evidence derived from experience is significant and reliable. Evidence, based upon experience, has led the way to solving complex issues for those willing to trust their observations. One of the past century’s greatest physicists based his theories upon observations of the physical world. From these observations Dr. Einstein derived evidence of general principals adhered to by the physical world which became the basis for his well-known theories—many still subject to scientific proof, waiting for the scientific community to develop the means to test his theories.

The *experience* of student random drug-testing programs serves as reliable evidence that the programs decrease drug use among students.

While Einstein’s voice, at times, was the only one supporting what he observed to be firm principals of the physical universe, student drug-testing prevention programs have the benefit of hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of observers telling us what they have witnessed: student drug-testing programs succeed in decreasing and deterring drug use among students; school and learning environments improve; test scores and graduation rates rise; students recognize and acknowledge that schools care about their choices; extra-curricular participation does not decrease, with many schools noting increases in participation levels; students using drugs are identified and helped before drug use dominates their lives; and, from the perspective of the students, it gives them the ability to refuse drugs without losing prestige in the eyes of their peers.

The experience of those witnessing student random drug-testing programs is that these programs deter drug use.

School administrators, teachers and coaches have spent years observing student cultures, environments and behaviors. They are expert observers who have much to say about their experiences with student random drug-testing prevention programs. Students also have experience with drug-testing programs and knowledge of the impact of such programs upon their peers.

So what is being said by people with *experience* of student drug-testing programs?

Zion-Benton Township High School district, Zion, Illinois: Gary M. Fields, Ph.D., former superintendent (1994–2003) who implemented student random drug-testing and SAP programs at the district in 1997 called the program a “six-year success story.” Dr. Fields, who initially opposed student drug-testing, made a list of what was learned as a result of his district’s experience with this prevention program. Number one was “. . . athlete drug testing is powerful in changing the party environment of a high school.” The evidence “. . . from athletes, coaches, teachers, parents, and the community is that the drug testing program has caused drugs of all kinds, including alcohol, to be used less.”(Source: Gary M. Fields, Ph.D., “Student Drug Testing—A Six Year Success Story of One High School,” *Drug Watch World News*, December 2003, p. 10.)

Durant School District, Oklahoma: Greg Howse, Safe School Director stated that school officials determined that the percentage of students who tested positive for marijuana has decreased from 20 percent to 11 percent in less than three years. He cites another success of the program in that a handful of students have thanked him for a program that gives them an excuse to refuse drugs. (Source: Jennifer Palmer and Wendy K. Kleinman, “Durant finds drug testing works,” *The Oklahoman*, February 1, 2008)

Hunterdon Central Regional High School District, Flemington, New Jersey: Lisa Brady, Ph.D., former principal, now superintendent of the district stated that: “After implementing Hunterdon’s program [in 1997], 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. 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. During the court case . . . , 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 In addition, there was an alarming increase in the use of marijuana by student athletes as was reported by the student athletes themselves.” In 2003¹ the school re-implemented its program. “At Hunterdon Central, we have had no students elect to drop from activities since the re-implementation of our program. This has mirrored our experience when we first implemented our program in 1997.”

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¹Hunterdon Central Regional High School won their case in the New Jersey Supreme Court. See <http://www.studentdrugtesting.org> for a summary and the ruling in the case.

(Sources: Lisa Brady, “Unlocking the Potential: Random drug testing works for this New Jersey high school—along with a strong student assistance program for referrals,” and Lisa Brady, “Commentary,” *Student Assistance Journal*, Summer 2003, Vol. 15, No. 3)

Jefferson Parish Public School System, Louisiana: School Board member Julie Quinn stated that “Ultimately, the argument boils down to whether school drug testing actually works. Does testing for drugs deter students from future drug use? . . . if you ask the people on the front lines—the

**“Ultimately, the argument boils down to whether school drug testing actually works. Does testing for drugs deter students from future drug use? . . . if you ask the people on the front lines—the teachers, principals and parents—the answer is absolutely yes.”
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teachers, principals and parents—the answer is absolutely yes. School officials are so pleased with the program and its results [in deterring drug use and getting help for drug users] that we are expanding it for next year [2003–2004].” (Source: Julie Quinn, “Op-ed: Random drug screenings move into the locker-lined halls of learning,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 8, 2003.)

Abbey School, Faversham, Kent: Peter Walker, former Headmaster began a three-year student drug-testing program in 2004. Mr. Walker gave the project “full marks” after it wiped out drug use among students who, one year before, had self-reported drug use at a level of about 40% of students. “Parents want children to learn in a drug-free environment. This scheme can guarantee this. This year, 40 percent of pupils achieved five good GCSE passes, compared with 26 percent last year and 32 percent the year before. I believe it [student drug testing program] contributed to an all-time high in GCSE pass rates. It has had an effect on contributions in the classroom and on behaviour - with far less disruption” (Sources: Ryan Sabey, “Couldn't Do Better, School Head's Praise for Drug Test Results,” *News of The World*, April 24th, 2005. “Drug tests help exam passes soar,” BBC News, August 30, 2005)

De La Salle High School, New Orleans, Louisiana: Yvonne R. Gelpi, former principal, in testimony about the school’s program, begun in 1997, stated that in three years detentions for fighting were reduced by 85 percent and those for disruptive behavior decreased 65 percent. “Mandatory drug testing works. The purpose of our drug testing program . . . is intended to stop an undesirable behavior that is interfering with learning. We have had no incidence [of false positive test results] in over 2,500 drug tests.” (Source: U. S. Congress. House. Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources of the Committee on Government Reform, *Hearing on Drug Testing in Schools: An Effective Deterrent?* 106th Congress, 2nd Session, May 30, 2000, 16–17, Washington, D.C.)

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De La Salle High School, New Orleans, Louisiana: Aaron Middleberg, former student (1995–1999), when asked by Principal Gelpi for his opinion about the student drug-testing program, he told her that the people who had been hanging around outside the school were gone and that the “number one thing that had made a difference was, every single student in De La Salle had a reason to say no. It is not a punishment, it is a privilege to know someone cares that much about you.” (Source: U. S. Congress. House. Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources of

the Committee on Government Reform, *Hearing on Drug Testing in Schools: An Effective Deterrent?* 106th Congress, 2nd Session, May 30, 2000, 46, Washington, D.C.)

Homestead High School, Southwest Allen County, Indiana: Kyle Brown, Junior, in a 2004 Letter to the Editor about his school's plan to implement a student drug-testing program as response to an editorial. "Monday's editorial stated that random drug tests are too expensive, of questionable deterrent value and a violation of privacy rights. My school is considering drug tests that cost \$15 each Certainly, we value our freedom. But if there's one thing we've learned . . . , it is that our freedom has a price. If that means drug testing, so be it. It's a price I'm willing to pay. The drug-testing proposal gives students a solid and defensible reason to say "no" to drugs and alcohol. It is a reason that will be understood and accepted by our classmates." (Source: Kyle Brown, Letter to the Editor: "Drug testing in schools will let students be accountable," *Ft. Wayne Indiana Journal Gazette*, June 23, 2004)

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Marion County Public School District, Ocala, Florida: The Marion County Public Schools District compiled statistics on its random testing program demonstrating that drug-use among students has dropped by one-third since the program's inception in 2004. According to spokesperson Kevin Christian, ". . . the program is working. It removes the temptation for many students. The results show students are making good decisions." (Source: Joe Callahan, "Drug use declines among Marion students in sports and clubs," *The Star-Banner*, August 22, 2007)

Oceanside Unified School District, Oceanside, California: Kenneth A. Noonan, superintendent and vice president of the California State Board of Education commented on the district's student random drug-testing program in a Letter to the Editor of a local newspaper, ". . . the safety of students at school or school activities should be the highest priority of school districts. In 1997, the Oceanside Unified Board of Education recognized that student athletes under the influence of drugs may endanger themselves or others. Students who are under the influence of drugs while playing a sport are a danger to themselves, but they are also putting their teammates and members of the opposing team at risk." The district believes strongly in the program and its benefits as demonstrated by Dr. Noonan's final comments, "It has been in operation for nine years and will continue until decided otherwise by the Board of Education or by a court with jurisdiction." (Source: Kenneth A. Noonan, Letter to the Editor, "Drug testing succeeds in O'side," *North County Times*, March 6, 2006)

Scott County School District, Huntsville, Tennessee: Judge Jamie Cotton, founder of the Schools Together Allowing No Drugs (STAND) program that helped to bring random drug testing of students to the district in 2001, noted that there had been a "steep decline in the number of recidivism, the repeat offenders, and in the number of positive tests overall." He affirmed that "The program has improved students' behavior and decreased the drug problem." Scott High School principal Sharon Wilson stated "We think it's very effective." (Sources: Heryn Riendeau, "Scott County's School Drug Testing Program Cuts Student Drug Use," *WBIR-TV News*, Knoxville, Tennessee, March 2005.)

Pequannock Valley School, Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Dr. William H. Trusheim, Principal, in a message of October 2006 stated that “our random drug testing program . . . has enjoyed a successful first year of existence.” The volunteer program “has grown to almost 80% participation through volunteerism. Students here are making a commitment to live drug and alcohol free. I feel that testing has been a successful deterrent for the students in our district. The reception has been overwhelmingly positive and we plan to keep spreading the message.”

Bayside Academy, Daphne, Alabama: Tom Johnson, headmaster of the private school when asked

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to comment on the impact of the school’s student random drug-testing program said, “I’ve been headmaster for about 25 years. It’s probably number one on my list of the best things I’ve ever done.”

(Source: *Mobile Press-Register*, 2004)

Killeen Independent School District, Killeen, Texas: Tal Anderson, special assistant superintendent of the district, in a report to the school board stated that “Most of our parents were very supportive and grateful when I told them their child had tested positive for drugs” (Source: Hillary S. Meeks, “School officials: Random drug testing a success,” *Killeen Daily Herald*, April 18, 2007)

Stonefountain College, Athlone, South Africa: Shaheed Shaik, College Head, introduced the policy January of 2006 and it was noted that the program “has been so successful in ridding the school of its narcotics problem that the national department of education is considering extending the programme to other schools. The response has been huge. . . .” (Source: Babalo Ndenze, “Pandor keen to extend Cape drug testing,” *The Cape Times*, 3, November 24, 2006)

Pike County School District, Kentucky: The school district credits its student random drug-testing program with, in their words, “. . . keeping kids off drugs.” In fact, the district’s school board members have voted to expand the program to include more students after a recent survey showed fewer students using drugs than when the testing program was initiated in 2003. (Source: *WYMT Mountain News*, April 2006)

Vista Unified School District, Vista California: Pat Moramarco, athletic director at Vista High School stated that “Some parents said they were concerned that students would stay out of extracurricular activities to avoid being tested, but that hasn’t happened. In fact, enrollment in extracurricular activities has increased slightly this year at the school.” (Source: Stacy Brandt, “Vista Unified’s drug-testing program called a success,” *North County Times*, May 3, 2006)

Georgetown Independent School District, Georgetown, Texas: Joe Dan Lee, Superintendent says the program is working and that the district expanded the program to include students in activities beyond athletics. Shirley Rinn, parent of a Georgetown student athlete said, “it’s a positive program because it’s about more than just punishing students.” (Source: Melissa McGuire, “Georgetown ISD to expand drug program,” *KVUE News*, June 6, 2006)

Tallasse City Schools, Alabama: James T. Jeffers, superintendent commented in a recent article that “For those of us in leadership, the random student drug testing is an expression of our concern for our students and our commitment to helping them grow up as drug-free, healthy and productive adults. The experience in Tallasse has been positive for our students, their families, our school and our community.” He further stated, “The student drug testing program has been well received and universally supported in the community. Rather than being radical and polarizing, random student drug testing has been embraced by students, parents, teachers

“Rather than being radical and polarizing, random student drug testing has been embraced by students, parents, teachers and others . . . as an effective supplement to what we teach in the classroom.” —James T. Jeffers, 2008

and others . . . as an effective supplement to what we teach in the classroom. Random student drug testing reinforces every other prevention program in our school by supporting the no-use standard with testing that is linked to non-punitive consequences.” (Source: James T. Jeffers, “Altering Minds and Reality Through Drug Testing.” *The School Administrator*, 34–5, January 2008)

Milford Exempted Village School District, Missouri: John Frye, superintendent in commenting on having only one positive test result out of 100 random tests performed stated very simply, “Never before have so many negatives added up to such a positive in the Milford schools.”

Hackettstown High School, Hackettstown, New Jersey: Chris Steffner, former principal says “Drug testing students works. The results show testing deters teen drug use.” She commented that she had seen many efforts to keep students from using drugs such as education programs, Just Say No campaigns, scary speeches from people who were caught driving drunk. “None of those things have any lasting impact, peer pressure is so strong.” Stacy Heller, student assistance counselor at the school was quoted in a newspaper article about the school’s two-year old program saying, “Drug use for the school’s 11th- and 12th-grade students, who have been tested the longest, is down significantly.” The school surveyed its students in the Spring of 2004 prior to starting the random-testing program. It re-surveyed students in the Spring of 2006 and compared the data to find that, as one example, there was a decrease in marijuana use among senior students from 45 percent to 29 percent for the two years the program has been in place. (Source: “Principal: Drug Testing Students Works,” *USA Today*, Nation section, July 11, 2006 and Lynn Olanoff, “Student Drug Use Down; Uncertain if Testing is Cause,” *The Express-Times* (New Jersey), October 23, 2006)

Sundown Independent School District, Sundown, Texas: Mike Motherall, superintendent of one of the first districts in the U.S. to implement student and employee drug testing, in an open letter describing Sundown’s program stated, “The biggest change we saw was in attitudes, reductions in discipline referrals, [increases in] extra-curricular participation, and in a positive overall feeling in the district. Without a doubt, mandatory drug testing, when put in place for the right reasons, and with careful consideration to its implementation, is an extremely positive and effective deterrent to the use of drugs.” (Source: Mike Motherall, Open Letter, <http://www.studentdrugtesting.org>)

San Clemente High School, San Clemente, California: Charles Hinman, principal, whose school has a voluntary student random drug-testing program, spoke about his school’s program to Fresno educational leaders, saying, “The program gives students an excuse to say no to peers who may invite them to do drugs. They can say that their parents made them enroll in the program and that they could be tested at any time. The intent of the program is not to catch kids doing drugs. It is

partly to arm them with a way to face peer pressure.” San Clemente High spends \$7,000 a year on its voluntary testing program, using funds it receives from student parking fees. Several students

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from Fresno's Roosevelt High School attended Mr. Hinman's presentation and agreed that a testing program would give students an excuse to say no to drugs. Senior Phillip Cortez was quoted as saying, “If there's five people coming at you to use drugs, you can say, 'I'm being tested.' There won't be as much pressure.” (Source: Anne Dudley Ellis and Marc

Benjamin, “Student drug tests explored; Autry pushes random but voluntary system,” *The Fresno Bee*, March 19, 2004)

Bullitt County School District, Shepherdsville, Kentucky: Jaime Goldsmith, District director of safe and drug-free schools states, “We have had nothing but success with this program.” The Bullitt District's program has been expanded from two high schools to encompass athletes and students in competitive extracurricular groups at all of its middle and high schools. (Source: Daarel Burnette II, “Bullitt will expand student drug testing,” *Courier-Journal* [Louisville], April 15, 2008)

Scottsbluff School District, Scottsbluff, Nebraska: Galen Nighswonger, high school principal, in a report on the first year of the district's random-testing program, stated, “The committee worked very hard to provide a tool which would have a positive effect on our students. The extremely low number of positive tests indicates the program is worth the cost.” (Source: Mindy Burbach, “Random Student Drug Testing,” Scottsbluff School District, Galen Nighswonger, First Year Report to the Board of Education, July 05, 2007)

This sampling of comments was created from a review of hundreds of media interviews, articles, school reports, letters and messages. The comments chosen are representative of what the experts are saying about their experience with student random drug-testing programs. C. E. Edwards, May 2008