

Commentary

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New Study Shows Efficacy of Mandatory Random Student Drug Testing

A new study released by the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences conducted an experimental evaluation of mandatory random student drug testing (MRSDT) programs in 36 high schools within 7 school districts.ⁱ About half of the schools in each district were randomly assigned to the treatment group and half to the control group. Treatment schools began implementing MRSDT programs while control schools did not.

MRSDT programs in public schools are limited to students who participate in athletics and extracurricular activities. In this study, some of the testing pools in schools with MRSDT were comprised of only athletes while others included athletes and extracurricular activity participants, leaving many students untested in those schools. The frequency of drug testing and drug test panels in schools with MRSDT programs varied. All seven school districts tested for marijuana, amphetamines, and methamphetamines. Cocaine and opiates were included in six of the seven district panels. Districts also tested for an assortment of other substances.

Students in all schools were surveyed and tracked over one year. Researchers compared students who participated in activities which made them subject to drug testing in schools with MRSDT to students who participated in the same activities in schools without MRSDT. Results are encouraging and provide extensive supportive of MRSDT programs.

Students subject to MRSDT reported a statistically significant lower rate of past 30-day use of substances included in their schools' drug testing panels (16%) than comparable students in schools without MRSDT (22%). This included alcohol for three districts and nicotine for two districts. Similar differences were also found between the two groups on other substance use measures, though were not statistically significant.

Contrary to what *USA Today* reports in "High school drug testing shows no long-term effect on use" (July 15, 2010),ⁱⁱ this study has demonstrated the value of MRSDT. Specifically *USA Today* highlights that MRSDT did not impact students' plans to use drugs in the future. It is true that there was no difference between the percentage of students subject to MRSDT (34%) and the percentage not subject to MRSDT (33%) that reported they planned to use substances within the next 12 months. However, MRSDT programs subject eligible students to random drug testing during the school year only; the summer months are a time when student substance use is no longer monitored. MRSDT programs are designed to deter substance use when students are in school. This study demonstrates that MRSDT is effective at achieving this goal.

It is sometimes claimed that drug testing programs deter student participation in extracurricular activities. In this study, MRSDT had no effect on the participation rates by students in activities that subjected them to drug testing. Nearly the same percentage of students in schools with MRSDT participated in activities covered by their schools' testing programs (53%) as the percentage of students in schools without MRSDT who participated in such activities (54%). This indicates that students in schools with MRSDT programs knew their participation in such activities subjected them to testing and it did not deter them from participation.

USA Today is critical of this study because there was no spillover effect on students who were not subject to MRSDT in schools with testing programs. This is not a surprise considering the MRSDT programs were studied for one year of implementation. As drug testing programs expand and include options for students to voluntarily enter the testing pool (as opposed to mandatory participation only through extracurricular activities), a spillover effect in time is possible.

Random student drug testing programs reinforce schools' comprehensive substance use prevention programs as a deterrent against youth substance use. These programs offer students a good reason not to use drugs, including alcohol and tobacco which can be included in testing panels along with other illegal drugs. Voluntary random drug testing programs also are used in public schools either as a single option or in combination with a mandatory program. This allows students, with a parent's permission, to make an active choice to participate in random drug testing. The U.S. Department of Education is to be commended for supporting this ambitious study and shedding light on the many benefits of school-based random student drug testing programs.

For more information on IBH and random student drug testing visit www.ibhinc.org and www.PreventionNotPunishment.org.

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ⁱ James-Burdumy, S., Goesling, B., Deke, J., Einspruch, E., & Silverberg, M. (2010, July). The effectiveness of mandatory-random student drug testing. U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Science. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

ⁱⁱ High school drug testing shows no long-term effect on use. (2010, July 15). *USA Today*. Retrieved July 19, 2010 from http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2010-07-15-drugtesting14_st_N.htm