

How many public school districts *currently* test students for illicit drugs on a random basis?

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June 2008

The question of how many public school districts *currently* conduct student random illicit drug-testing programs arises often and the answer to this question is complicated and elusive. The U. S. Department of Education, as the single source for information on all public districts in the U.S., its territories and possessions, has not required information on random illicit drug-testing programs from school districts. This leaves the question open to various estimates based upon surveys, media items, tallies by school associations and state departments of education. A definitive answer is further complicated by the fact that the number of school districts adopting programs increases on a weekly basis leaving estimates outdated by time of publication.

The Student Drug-Testing Coalition (SDTC) captures information on school districts with testing programs from a variety of sources.¹ More importantly, in the process of collecting data, the Coalition has been able to track and estimate the *frequency* of school districts implementing random testing programs in the United States. Formalized studies, such as the one recently published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, provide estimates, at a specific point in time, of the percentage of U. S. districts with random illicit drug-testing programs. Such surveys contribute significantly to establishing a baseline point from which a measure of frequency may be useful in estimating the current number of districts with student random drug-testing programs.

While surveys derive percentages from a specific sample, requirements in various states may directly influence survey results. This means that while one survey may target public school districts in Florida, Texas, Montana, and New York, another survey may target districts in Illinois, Kentucky, Iowa, Indiana, and California—states with significant differences in the approach to random drug testing. Data from surveys is then extrapolated to present a national estimate of districts with programs which may or may not be an accurate representation.

In the survey samples above, there are factors that will influence the number of districts with random drug-testing programs in specific states. If not surveying *all* school districts in the U. S., these factors will influence resultant estimates of national percentages. Such factors may include case law, state court constitutional interpretations, supportive/non-supportive legislation, statute, etc. For example, Kentucky state government is supportive of student random testing, therefore, the number of districts adopting or maintaining random programs is presently 50 percent (50%) and increasing

¹The SDTC databases do not contain information on *every* district with a program. It is estimated that it has captured information on only about 8%–10% of districts with programs.

weekly.² Whereas in Iowa, no districts are known to have programs as a result of Iowa statute.³ The same observations would apply to the first sample group cited in that Texas enacted law in 2007 requiring steroid testing of student athletes which has opened the door to random testing for illicit drugs in many districts. In that state, about nine percent (9%) of districts have implemented programs with additional implementations taking place on a weekly basis, whereas in Montana, only three districts of 127 are known by the SDTC to have adopted/implemented random-testing programs. National estimates, based upon the survey groups in the above two examples, would most likely not yield a representative percentage of how many public school districts randomly test students across the U.S. Depending upon the survey sample, therefore, data findings may or may not be a valid representation of districts across the country.

Until the U. S. Department of Education, with access to all public school districts in the U. S., begins to include questions in its forms specific to student drug-testing policies *and* programs for random and other types of student drug testing, the usefulness of various surveys and data are limited and do not answer the basic question of how many U. S. school districts *currently* test students on a random basis for illicit drugs.⁴ Any research into the subject must clearly distinguish between schools and school districts; those districts that may have a policy but are not drug testing students; random illicit-drug or steroid testing; reasonable suspicion drug testing; and mandatory and/or voluntary drug testing.

With an understanding of the distinctions between program and policy, testing for illicit and/or steroid drugs and random and/or other types of drug testing, the most recent published survey data on student random drug testing is presented and will be used to formulate an estimated percentage of districts with testing programs current for May 2008.

In the Spring of 2005, a survey of 1343 drug prevention coordinators in a “nationally representative sample” of school districts with high schools was conducted. The survey found that 14 percent (14%) of 1,337 districts with high schools conducted random drug testing during the 2004–2005 school year. Almost all districts randomly tested athletes (93.4% of districts with random drug-testing programs), and 65 percent (65%) randomly tested other students engaged in extracurricular activities; 28 percent (28%) randomly tested all students.⁵ While this study presents an estimate of the number of school districts with random testing programs in 2005, it does not provide a means to estimate how many districts may currently have student random drug-testing programs.

Also needed is a means to maintain a reasonably accurate current estimation of the percentage of districts with random illicit drug testing programs. To do this requires baseline and frequency-of-implementation estimates. The Ringwalt, et al. 2005 survey data will be used as a base-line percentage estimate of districts with student random drug-testing programs, and the SDTC’s data

²Student Drug-Testing Coalition database: School districts; Kentucky districts table.

³IA code Chapter 808: Searches are only permitted when probable cause can be known, thus not allowing random testing.

⁴Policy is set at the district and board level, not at individual schools.

⁵Chris Ringwalt, et al., “Random Drug Testing in US Public School Districts,” *American Journal of Public Health*, May 2008, 98: 826-828. Note, six of the 1343 surveys were discarded due to inconsistent results.

collection will provide a measure of the frequency of program adoption.

The SDTC has collected data on program implementation since 2003 observing that by 2008, *on average*, the frequency of adoption/implementation of student random drug-testing programs is two school districts per week. Based upon this frequency rate, it is estimated that a *minimum* of 312 districts have adopted/implemented programs since the above-noted survey was conducted.⁶ This estimate represents about two and one-half percent (2.5%) of U. S. school districts implementing programs during the intervening three years.

It is estimated, therefore, that by May 2008, *at a minimum*, 16.5 percent (16.5%)⁷ of U. S. public school districts have student random drug-testing programs with a conservative estimated annual average increase, based upon current frequency levels, of at least one percent (1%) of districts adding these programs to existing prevention programs every year.⁸

Acknowledgments:

Corinne Shea of the Institute for Behavior and Health for reviewing and editing the paper.

⁶Calculations: 2 districts/week x 52 weeks=104 districts/year adopting programs. From the time of the 2005 survey: 3 years x 104=312 districts adopting/implementing programs by May 2008. This represents a two and one-half percent (2.5%) increase above the 2005 estimated percentage of schools with program based upon the SDTC database of 12,635 U.S. school districts.

⁷Using the SDTC database, 16% represents about 2,000 school districts.

⁸In reality, it has been observed that as more programs are implemented, there appears to be an exponential effect upon the implementation rate which makes the estimated average of districts per week implementing programs conservative. Frequency will continue to be monitored by the SDTC, allowing for annual updates to the estimated number of U.S. school districts with student random illicit drug testing programs.