

Hunterdon Central – A Historical Perspective

By: Lisa Brady - Superintendent

As the current superintendent of Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, New Jersey, I have been involved in the student random drug testing movement since 1997 as a vice principal, principal and now superintendent. When our high school began randomly drug testing athletes in September 1997, this approach to drug and alcohol prevention was unpopular and, in many areas, unheard of. We have learned many lessons in ten years and have witnessed changes in the climate surrounding this issue that would have been hard to imagine at the time. We have watched as a small number of schools pioneered these efforts and paved the way for over 2,000 school districts nationally who now use student random drug as part of their comprehensive efforts to tackle drug and alcohol use by our nation's teens.

Among the most important lessons we have learned along the way is that strong, steady leadership from the district superintendent and board of education is a key component to success. The days of district leadership turning a blind eye to the myriad of school challenges related to drug and alcohol use by students is fading away. This is encouraging and in the best interest of our schools. There has been a remarkable shift in the willingness of school districts to survey their students on their drug and alcohol use and make this data public to their parents and communities. In years past, this practice was taboo and many superintendents and school boards feared that the information would cast an unfavorable light on their schools.

Today, there is a collective national awareness that unacceptable numbers of our teens are involved in the use dangerous drugs such as methamphetamine, ecstasy, heroin and that they have access to high-grade marijuana. Alcohol use is even more pervasive and results in risky sexual behaviors, automobile accidents and even death. The media is packed with these stories and messages yet the frightening adolescent activities persist. And to the dismay of many school administrators and boards of education, responsibility has bubbled over from our homes, into our schools.

This is not to negate that large numbers of superintendents and school boards still resist the idea of shared responsibility in keeping our student's drug and alcohol free. There are many who resist strongly the notion of schools randomly testing students for alcohol and other drugs. Despite the fact that the United States Supreme Court has upheld student random drug testing twice for students involved in athletics and again for students involved in extracurricular activities, they fear legal challenges and push back from parents and students. For those of us who have accepted the challenge and provided leadership on this front, I can tell you that it has been well worth the effort.

At Hunterdon Central, we have seen a strong, well documented decrease in the use of drugs as well as alcohol since the implementation of our random drug testing program. Schools considering this approach must be sure to survey their students prior to program implementation and create a strong statement of need which can be shared with students, parents and the community. As a pioneering program, Hunterdon Central was sued in

August 2000 following three years of a successful program. Our case was finally won in 2003 in the New Jersey Supreme Court which praised our school for its scrupulous collection of data and ability to justify the need for the program. Surveying students is also a critical component in being able to track program effectiveness which helps to justify the expenditure of taxpayer dollars as part of these efforts. Anecdotal information from students and school based counselors is also an important piece of the picture and should be strongly considered as a district builds its case for a student random drug testing program.

Another thing we have learned is that student random drug testing must always be part of a larger, comprehensive approach to drug and alcohol prevention. It cannot be effective as a stand alone cure all in the absence of good curriculum, educational prevention programs, parent outreach and substance abuse counseling. Students involved in the use of drugs need strong support and a network of strategies designed to encourage healthy behaviors and a healthy lifestyle. Student random drug testing is only one component of these efforts. We have learned that the critical piece which helps to turn parents and students around when selling the idea of random drug testing is that the program takes a non-punitive approach to the use of drugs and alcohol by our teens.

In 2008, we added a new component to our program which involves the random testing of our students for alcohol when they attend dances and proms. We number all tickets for these activities when they are sold and then enter the ticket numbers into a computer program which randomly selects 25-30% of the numbers. At the site of the dance or prom, students whose ticket numbers have been generated are given a breath test by school personnel trained to operate the breathalyzer. At dances, students who successfully pass the breath test may have their ticket price refunded. At proms, we work with our photographer to provide a discount on prom photos for students who successfully pass the breath test. If students are found to be under the influence, their parents are contacted and they must come to the site of the event and take their child home. The student is referred to our school student assistance counselor for follow-up counseling. This program has been extremely successful and sends a very clear message about the fact that we will not tolerate students attending these functions under the influence of alcohol. It also helps us to acknowledge that teen use of alcohol is by far our biggest challenge and that we are taking positive, effective steps to deal with this issue at school.

At Hunterdon Central, we are proud of the leadership role that we have assumed in the fight against adolescent drug and alcohol use. As a superintendent, I am convinced that it is critical for Boards of Education, central administrators and school principals to send a clear, unequivocal message that drug and alcohol use by our students is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. This message has a direct impact on school climate and culture that may be hard to measure but is palpable to all of us who live on the school campus. At Hunterdon Central, we welcome and embrace the validation of our efforts and encourage other schools to explore the use of student random drug testing as part of a comprehensive effort to diminish the use of alcohol and other drugs in schools.