

Random Student Drug Begins in Sweden

On April 2, 2008, the school and youth board, chaired by Lisa Flinth, in the city of Landskrona (in the very south of Sweden) committed to introduce random student drug testing (RSDT) at one of the schools in the city starting this fall. Early in 2009 there will be a new decision about extending RSDT to the other half dozen local schools after an evaluation of the first semester in the pilot school.

In Sweden there is 9 years of compulsory schooling. The children start 1st grade the year they are seven. There is a grade "0" which is not compulsory but almost everyone starts there, at the age of 6. After finishing 9th grade, virtually all students continue to "gymnasium" which is three more years of education, almost always in another school. It can be university preparatory course or students can learn a trade. Students in Sweden normally finish gymnasium the year they turn 19.

This fall Landskrona will introduce RSDT to 8th and 9th grades, when students are between 14 and 16 (actually 13 if their birthdays are late in the year). The city has its gymnasiums organised together with two other smaller cities making the political process of adopting RSDT much slower, but the goal is to have RSDT in those schools also in future years.

Suspicion-based drug tests have been used in Swedish schools (gymnasium and compulsory level) for many years. There have been some rulings recently in various Swedish courts making the legal situation much clearer although it was initially quite confused. Lately the issue of RSDT has been discussed more widely in Sweden largely as the results of the publication in 2003 of a book on drug policy by RNS (National Association for a Drug-free Society). The book was written by Staffan Hübinette, a teacher on the board of RNS. Today, as a result of these court rulings and the publication of this book, many school officials feel more confident about using this new program to identify problems of drug abuse in order to help youth who are using drugs

Many of the national authorities in Sweden dealing with school and health matters remain skeptical about RSDT. The National School Board has been particularly negative. Despite this attitude, some local school officials have done what they have felt is in the best interests of their students by supporting RSDT. This initiative has established an important precedent which is expected to influence the national debate on the use of random student drug testing in Sweden in the future.

Although the national awareness about random student drug testing has been low, one school doctor, Nils Lundin, in the city of Helsingborg, near Landskrona, introduced RSDT to a couple of the gymnasiums in his town in programs where they use dangerous machinery. Lundin based his support for RSDT on laws regulating safety in the work place. He was criticized by the Ombudsman of the Parliament for not making it clear enough that the drug tests were not compulsory and that the students could say no to them if they wanted to. Lundin changed the testing program in response to this criticism and now uses RSDT very frequently. Parents and students are almost universally positive to the student drug testing system he uses.

The mayor of Landskrona from 2006, Torkild Strandberg, had been in the Swedish Parliament but after a successful election in his home town he resigned from Parliament to take command of his local government. While in the Parliament he worked with drug issues, which is how he came across the issue of RSDT. He quickly realized that this was an important new program. When Strandberg visited the USA in the early spring 2006 he was inspired by the widespread, and obviously successful, use of RSDT.

The city of Landskrona has suffered from severe social problems for many years. It is a small town with all of the problems of a big city. One problem they faced was unrest in schools which reflected the fact that drug use in the south of Sweden is higher than the national average.

Here is how drug testing will work in Landskrona. Parents and students will be introduced to the idea of RSDT. They can join or not. A computer will randomly choose names from the list of those who have joined so the student can be drug tested by the school nurse. Students will be asked if they agree to be tested. If yes, the student will give a urine sample, with the door closed. If the student says no, the parents will be notified and no further action will be taken. The urine samples will be analyzed at a laboratory. Results will be given within three days. If the test is positive for recent drug use, the school will establish a plan with the student's family to help the student in appropriate ways. The initial RSDT plan is to test 20% of the students during a school year.

In support of this effort RNS commissioned a renowned public opinion polling institute to ask 1,000 people (the standard level in Sweden) to state whether they think schools should use drug tests to detect drug use among the students. The results: 71% answered yes, 22% no and 7% didn't know. Blue collar workers responded: 79% yes, white collar workers 69% yes, academics 64% yes. RNS published these results the day after Landskrona made their decision to launch RSDT producing substantial national media attention.

The Minister of Education in Sweden's national Government, Jan Bjorklund, has been skeptical of RSDT. He is in the same political party, the Liberal party, as Torkild Strandberg. Despite his skepticism recently Bjorklund was quoted in a major newspaper saying that he thinks the politicians of Landskrona should be credited for this decision noting that this move shows that they take the issue of drug abuse among their young seriously. He also said that he thinks other cities will follow suit in the future.

These dramatic developments are a major breakthrough for the issue of RSDT in Sweden. The fact that one of the lawyers for the National School board, Alf Johansson, spoke out against the use of RSDT in Landskrona will provoke more discussion of RSDT. Landskrona's bold move is heating up the debate on RSDT in Sweden.

This move by one school, and the debate it has spawned, is a positive development in Sweden's long-standing efforts to limit illegal drug use.

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