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Democracy Dies in Darkness

School drug tests: Costly, ineffective, and more common than you think

By Christopher Ingraham By Christopher Ingraham

Wonkblog

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Twenty-thousand dollars could do a lot for a typical cash-strapped school district. You could renovate a classroom, or hire a part-time teacher's aide, or buy some computers or a whole bunch of text books.

The school district in Carroll County Georgia -- about 25 miles west of Atlanta -- has \$20,000 to spend, but it won't be on any of those things. Instead, they're implementing a random drug testing program for their public high school students. They plan to test [up to 80 students each month](#), according to WSB-TV in Atlanta. With school drug tests costing about \$24 a pop, [according to Dr. Sharon Levy](#) of the American Academy of Pediatrics, that works out to about \$20,000 per year.

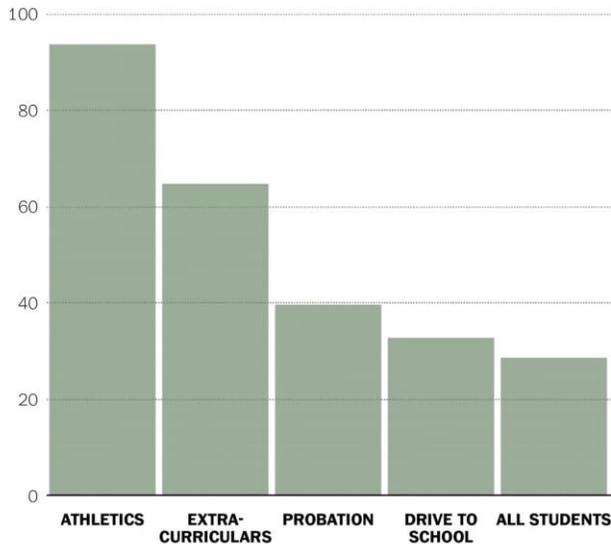
[According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention](#), about 18 percent of public high schools -- nearly 1 in 5 -- have mandatory drug testing policies like the one Carroll County adopted. Like most of these programs, Carroll County's only applies to athletes, students participating in other extracurricular activities (like marching band), and students who drive to school.

It may seem odd that a school can require your kid to get tested simply for joining, say, the chess club. But the Supreme Court [upheld the constitutionality](#) of such programs in 2002. "We find that testing students who participate in extracurricular activities is a reasonably effective means of addressing the school district's legitimate concerns in preventing, deterring and detecting drug use," Clarence Thomas wrote for the 5-4 majority.

But schools are increasingly pushing further. For instance, a nationally-representative survey of 1,300 school districts found that among the districts with drug testing programs, 28 percent randomly tested *all* students -- not just ones participating in after-school programs. These schools are opening themselves up to a legal challenge

Why schools are drug testing your kids

Among schools that perform drug tests, percent that require random testing for students who participate in the following activities



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Source: American Journal of Public Health

But in the years since the Supreme Court ruling, numerous studies have shown little evidence of effectiveness among these programs. To wit:

- A [2013 study](#) looked at 14 years of data on student drug use and found that school drug testing was associated with "moderately lower marijuana use," but increased use of other, more dangerous illicit drugs.
- A [2014 study](#) concluded that drug testing was "was not associated with changes in substance use."
- A [2013 study](#) comparing drug use rates among schools with and without drug testing programs found some short-term deterrent effect among students who were tested, but no effects among students who weren't tested, and no long-term effects on either drug use or intention to use drugs in the future.

More to the point, school drug programs don't test for the one drug that is most favored by high school students, and which is also the most hazardous to their health: alcohol.

The tests also carry a number of significant negative consequences in and of themselves: students subject to testing may be less likely to participate in extracurricular activities. The tests may violate students' privacy by making their personal medications known to school administrators. And they may subject students to disciplinary action, like [harsh long-term suspensions](#) and expulsions, that harm their academic prospects.

For all of these reasons, the American Academy of Pediatrics recently **came out against** the widespread adoption of drug testing in schools. "The AAP supports effective substance abuse services in schools but opposes widespread implementation of drug testing as a means of achieving substance abuse intervention goals because of the lack of evidence for its effectiveness," **they wrote**.

The **National Institutes on Drug Abuse** says that "because of the conflicting findings on student drug testing, more research is needed," and that "drug testing should never be undertaken as a stand-alone response to a drug problem."

Despite the research and the guidance of experts, the proportion of public high schools with random drug testing programs has risen from 14 percent in 2006 to 18 percent in 2012, **according to the CDC**. Schools in **Ohio, New Jersey, South Carolina, Alabama, and Wyoming** are currently considering mandatory drug testing programs.

One last number for you: school drug tests tend to not yield a lot of positive results. Sharon Levy of the AAP **estimates** that it costs \$3,000 for each positive test, or about 1 positive for every 125 students tested. That means that Carroll County, Georgia's \$20,000 investment will turn up about 6 student drug users -- 7 if they're lucky.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/27/schools-drug-tests-costly-ineffective-and-more-common-than-you-think/?utm_term=.7c8ddc06b854

The Effectiveness of Mandatory-Random Student Drug Testing

Students involved in extracurricular activities and subject to in-school drug testing reported less substance use than comparable students in high schools without drug testing, according to a new evaluation released today by the Institute of Education Sciences.

Although illicit substance use among adolescents has declined over the past decade, it remains a concern. Under one approach to address this problem, students and their parents agree to students being tested for drugs (and in some cases, tobacco or alcohol) on a random basis as a condition of participation in athletic or other school-sponsored competitive extracurricular activities.

The study, *The Effectiveness of Mandatory-Random Student Drug Testing*, examined 7 districts that were awarded grants in 2006 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools to implement mandatory-random drug testing programs in their 36 high schools. The districts volunteered to be in the program and were spread across seven states. Because these were districts committed to adopting such programs and they were clustered in mostly Southern states, the study results cannot be generalized to all high schools nationally.

The evaluation involved more than 4,700 students and compares the substance use reported by those in "treatment" high schools randomly assigned to implement the drug testing program immediately (in the 2007–08 school year) with the substance use reported by students in "control" schools assigned to delay implementing the program for a year (until 2008–09).

The goal of the mandatory drug testing program was to reduce student substance use in three ways—by deterring substance use, by detecting substance use, and by having spillover effects on other students in the school as they observe and are influenced by the behavior of their peers. Students were surveyed before and after the program started about: their participation in school activities; their attitudes about school and knowledge of school policy; their attitudes about substance use and awareness of drug testing; and their report of substance use in the past month, in the past six months and their lifetime. Researchers focused primarily on students who participated in activities that would make them subject to the random drug testing, but also examined the impacts on other students.

Key findings include:

- Some 16 percent of students subject to drug testing reported using substances covered by their district's testing in the past 30 days, compared with 22 percent of comparable students in schools without the program. Similar patterns were observed for other measures of student-reported substance use, but those differences were not statistically significant.
- In the one-year period studied, there was no evidence of any "spillover effects" to students who were not subject to testing—the percentage who reported using substances in the past month was the same at both treatment and control schools.
- There was no effect on any group of students' reported intentions to use substances in the future. Of the students subject to drug testing, 34 percent reported that they "definitely will" or "probably will" use substances in the next 12 months, compared with 33 percent of comparable students in schools without the program.
- There was no evidence that the drug testing reduced students' participation in extracurricular activities or affected their connection to school.

- Researchers also examined whether students in schools with drug testing , perhaps because they were more aware of the consequences of substance use, might be underreporting such use. However, there were no differences between the treatment and control groups in students' reports of how honest they were in completing the surveys or in how often students didn't respond to particular questions. Also, there were no inconsistencies in reports of lifetime use between the surveys they completed before knowing whether their school required drug testing and afterwards.

The study was directed by the National Center for Education Evaluation within IES and conducted by RMC Research Corporation and Mathematica Policy Research.

<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104025/>