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## **Student subject to mandatory random drug testing report less substance use, study finds**

*Evaluation analyzed impact of random drug testing policy in 7 districts*

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.** If students are sufficiently aware of the possibility of drug testing, the threat of testing may cause students to stop using substances or give them a reason to refuse offers from peers to use substances.
- **By Detecting Substance Use.** Students who test positive for drugs can be identified by school staff and referred to appropriate drug treatment or counseling services.
- **By Having Spillover Effects on Nonparticipants.** Although the program is most likely to affect the substance use of students who participate in activities subject to drug testing, it may also have spillover effects to other students in the school, as they observe and are influenced by the behavior of their peers.

Researchers compared students in the treatment and control schools who participated in activities covered under their districts' drug-testing policies. For example, if football and soccer were covered activities, the analysis compared rates of substance use reported by football and soccer players in the treatment and control schools.

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.
- Among students not participating in extra-curricular activities covered by the testing program, the percentages reporting drug use in the past month were similar for the 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, two concerns raised about such programs.

Researchers also examined two issues that might have undermined the study's findings. First they looked at 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 greater inconsistencies between the treatment and control groups in reports of lifetime use between the surveys they completed before knowing whether their school required drug testing and afterwards.

Second, the study team assessed whether the program affected participation in extracurricular activities – perhaps the chance of being tested for drugs in treatment schools changed the proportion or types of students who participated in activities covered under the new policy. However, the study found no significant impacts on extracurricular participation and the same pattern of reduced drug use in the past 30 days when comparing "likely" participants between the treatment and control schools.

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