

## ***What can they be thinking? To Test or Not to Test***

In February while attending the National Leadership Conference of the Community Anti-drug Coalitions of America (CADCA). MCSAAC staff heard a number of the prominent speakers -- including Drug Czar, John P. Walters -- press attendees to urge their school districts adopt a student drug testing policy in their communities. Walters called the recent Supreme Court decision that allowed testing of students in after school programs, one of the "best available tools to combat the problem of illegal drugs". (Only participants in optional school programs, i.e. sports, clubs, school band etc may currently be tested.)

In promoting such testing he joins a number of high profile groups including the Drug-Free America Foundation, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, and the National Association of School Boards in pressing for student drug testing programs. What can they be thinking?

Before we jump too quickly into yet another simplistic solution to the very serious problem of adolescent drug use, we need to consider the range of consequences to such a program. Joining with the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Drug Policy Alliance, many of us who work with young people find the clamor to have members of the choir and the drama club pee in paper cups counterproductive at best and absurd at worst. It is disconcerting that at the same time we campaign to have young people think through their actions to the possible consequences, our adult colleagues' knee jerk responses suggest they have not fully "thought it through"..

Thankfully, we have learned a few things about teens and substance abuse. In fact we are closing in on some strategies that research has shown can be expected to prevent many of the risky behaviors that concern us most. Busy young people involved in a wide range of constructive alternatives, youth who feel valued by adults other than their own parents, even teens whose family life is chaotic or destructive, are apt to find a safe haven in extracurricular activity. Not surprisingly, we've learned that young people so engaged are much less apt to spend their time and energy getting drunk or high. In fact, those at risk may find in extracurricular programs just the interested adult, teacher, volunteer, or coach, who will guide them through the minefield of their teen years.

Sadly, there will be some students who have already lost their way. Afterschool activities, however attractive, will not attract them -- random drug testing or not. Then there are many more whose personal sense of direction is so clear that any drug use is unthinkable. It is the group that falls between the two that has both the most to gain from participation and, ironically, the most to lose by random drug screening. It's possible -- as drug testing proponents suggest -- that some will be so drawn to extracurricular activities that they will be motivated to cease experimentation in order to participate. Perhaps, but young people tell us that it is more likely to scare away the dabblers who fear exposure. The fifteen year old who smoked pot a couple of times over the summer is unlikely to sign up for afterschool basketball in September.

The question is: will random drug testing deter drug use or will the specter of the paper cup diminish any chance teens at greater risk will connect with that special adult guide or discover the interest or activity that will carry them safely into their adult years? My experience tells me that the experimenter or occasional user will likely forgo extracurricular activities rather than chance the repercussions of a positive drug screen. Is this really what we want to do? Do we want to screen out the very young people who might benefit most from these activities?

In fairness I'd like to point out that there is an important place for drug screens; though not with large scale after school "fishing expeditions". In fact drug screens may be the best tool we have once trust has been broken and the youthful offender is involved in a supervised rehabilitation program.

In rehabilitation, drug screens serve three vital functions. Because results are objective measures of compliance with treatment, the building blocks of recovery -- confidence and trust -- can be rebuilt by judicious use of screens. Clean urines reassure concerned parents and educators -- removing the daunting challenge of sorting through what may be normal adolescent behavior and behavior attributable to drug use. Thirdly, is the opportunity drug testing presents for the young person to stand up to peer pressure without losing face. The teen being randomly tested for drugs has a license to say "no" when offered drugs.

Yes, there is a place for drug testing. No, that place is not screening members of the chess club or the school band or any young people whose overall performance has earned them the community's trust. The price is too high; literally and figuratively.

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