

Aug. 28, 2007

A New Look at Drug Testing

With good communication, schools can win the support of parents and students for drug-testing programs

By Austin Buffum, Jon Hamro, and Charles Hinman

Imagine a school drug testing program that is supported by students, staff, parents and community, is not controversial, receives no complaints and is proven effective to help children say no to drugs.

Impossible you say? Take a close look at the Capistrano Unified School District's Voluntary Drug Testing Program. Now in its sixth year, the program has spread to school districts throughout California and is being implemented or considered in states across the nation. The program has been endorsed by the local PTSA, government and law enforcement, the White House Office of Drug Control and Policy, and the California League of High Schools.

Voluntary drug testing started at San Clemente High School in the fall of 2001 when the Capistrano school board had the courage to approve a pilot program. The program now exists in four of the district's five high schools and three middle schools. More than half of San Clemente High's 3,000 students participate and a recent student survey has provided some amazing results.

About the program

The program's primary purposes are to promote conversations about drug use in the home and provide children with a tool to use against peer pressure. Parents often find it difficult to broach the subject of drug use with their children and our program provides an avenue for discussion.

Parents are counseled on how to approach this conversation through a variety of communication tools, including open forums, letters sent home, e-mail, and recorded voice messages. The key point is how to address the question that every child will ask: "Don't you trust me?" Parents are guided to explain to their child that the program has nothing to do with trust, but rather a fulfillment of their responsibility to provide the child with every tool possible to cope with peer pressure.

Each fall, every home is sent a school registration packet that includes a Voluntary Drug Testing Registration form and an explanation of the program. Participation is voluntary, but both parent and student must sign the form marking YES or NO and turn it in as part of the registration process. This simple task helps parents begin a conversation about drug use.

"I learned more about drug use in my daughter's school and about her friends who were experimenting with drugs than I ever imagined by discussing the pros and cons of the Voluntary Drug Testing Program," said San Clemente High School Parent Shelly Hulsizer. "After a long talk, we both decided being part of this program was in her best interest. I am glad the school provides this opportunity."

One of the program's pillars is that both parent and student must voluntarily agree to participate. Forms are not processed unless both signatures are present. Once a student is signed up, it becomes easy to say no to drugs.

Consider the following scenario:

Drug Pusher (and likely friend or acquaintance): "Hey Heather, want to take a hit?"

Heather: "I always wanted to, but my parents made me sign up for that *&%\$ drug testing program. With my luck, my name would be pulled and I would be on restriction forever."

Drug Pusher: "Bummer, your parents suck."

Heather: "Thanks anyway."

In this scenario, the pressure is taken off the child and placed on the parent. It's a position almost any parent would love to be in.

At the end of registration, forms are separated into stacks of Yes and No. The No forms are stored for a year and the Yes forms are sent to an independent drug testing agency where student names are placed into computerized random selection software. On approximately 20 days throughout the year (selected by the drug testing school administrator), students are randomly selected by the drug testing company to provide a urine sample.

Names are provided to the school administrator the day prior to the test and students are called out of class throughout the day. The testing procedure is done by a lab technician and no district employees are present. Very little class time is missed and the process is almost transparent on campus. How many students are tested varies, but the primary purpose is for students to believe that their name could be drawn. If this were not the case, the drug pusher could reply in the scenario above that "It's OK. Go for it. No one I have known has ever been tested."

If the result is negative, the parents receive a postcard in the mail. If the result is positive, the parents are contacted by telephone from the independent drug testing agency and the specimen is sent to the lab for determination of volume and frequency. At no time are the results shared with a school official, law enforcement or any other individual or agency. It is the second fundamental foundation of this program that results of the drug tests are shared only with parents and no one else.

If parents are given unfortunate news and want to seek counseling or treatment, the contractor recommends several organizations that offer these types of services. A parent also can contact the school counselor or psychologist for free services. If parents choose this option, the relationship is kept in the strictest confidence between parent and school counselor/psychologist.

The schools offer this program as a free service to its families and pays for each \$25 test through fundraising.

Does the program work?

Initially, only qualitative data existed because of the program's design of confidentiality, and findings were based only on parent and students who willingly shared their personal experiences.

Based on these findings, we believed the program was working, but when we started discussing it with other districts, its effectiveness was questioned.

At end of the 2004-05 school year, the San Clemente High School administration sent out an anonymous questionnaire to 900 students about the program to see if their qualitative beliefs held true and if they could quantify the results. The following results solidified their beliefs and provided proof of an effective program:

- Over 26 percent (40 percent freshman) of the students who signed up said they used the program to say no to drugs. Putting that in real numbers means that more than 400 students at San Clemente said no to drugs with the help of this program.
- 17 percent of all students said they used the program to say no to drugs even though they were not enrolled.
- 26 percent of students who were using drugs prior to enrollment said their use declined after participating.
- 15 percent of students said they stopped using drugs after being enrolled.
- 60 percent of all students said the program resulted in a conversation about drugs and drug use in the home.
- 57 percent of all students said the program is helpful and should be continued.

While student drug testing will continue to be debated for years, the Capistrano Unified School District has developed a program and policy that is a win-win for both school and family. The conversation about drug use and results of drug testing takes place in the home – where it belongs. The school only facilitates the process.

Each year, enrollment in the program has increased and as trust between school and community continues to grow that pattern will continue. This program should not be viewed as the solution to student drug use, but it should be viewed as a positive proactive tool of drug use prevention.

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