

Drug tests make no sense - 27 Mar 2008

Gino Vumbaca, *27March 2008*



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YOU will often hear people talk about an issue being a question of common sense. In the area of drug policy, many people in the community think that drug testing of school students is such an issue. Surely we should do all we can to stop young people using drugs and so testing them to make sure they don't is common sense?

The truth is that some things are not as sensible as they may seem, and drug testing school students is one of those things.

The new report from the Australian National Council on Drugs, prepared by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction, clearly exposes school drug testing for the inefficient program it is.

Apart from costing between \$100 million and \$1 billion to introduce, depending on whether the program would cover all students or a random sample tested weekly or yearly, the evidence is clear that it would be ineffective and potentially harmful.

So how can such a sensible-sounding program be so wrong? First, let's think about the cost. When education became part of the centre stage of the recent federal election, would anyone have seriously accepted that the Government should spend an additional \$1 billion of education money on collecting urine samples or mouth swabs from students? Or that turning teachers, in their chosen profession as educators of children, into quasi drug testers would be the "education revolution" the community was looking for?

Second, its substantive lack of effectiveness has to be considered. The independent, but limited, research available on this issue from the US shows us that when schools that have testing programs are compared with nearby schools that do not, very little difference in levels of drug use by students is found.

What needs to be remembered is that self-promotional reports from US schools that have introduced drug testing without any real information either on the level of drug use before testing or in surrounding schools that have not introduced testing, do not constitute independent evidence. Adherence to a belief or ideology they may be, but evidence they are not.

Third, there are several problems school drug testing can cause. Drug testing is by no means infallible and a percentage of false positive results will be returned. Thus we would be allowing a system to be put in place that we know will result in a proportion of students being falsely accused of using illegal drugs. This would be traumatic for such students and their families. Drug testing also undermines the critical area of trust between the school, its teachers and its students.

Teachers need to focus on their students' education and on teaching the skills they will need to make the difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood. The positive results from developing a nurturing relationship between schools, teachers and students should never be underestimated.

Also, school drug testing can create a range of harmful, if unintended, consequences. The most dangerous of these is that students could start to adjust any drug-taking behaviour to avoid detection, such as by using different drugs that have shorter detection periods, bingeing on drugs on Friday night to have the system cleared by Monday and any possible test, or consuming more alcohol as it is not tested. Creating a system that will inevitably lead to some students focusing on learning how to avoid detection rather than making responsible decisions is not a step forward.

It is the role of the Australian National Council on Drugs to advise federal, state and territory governments on drug and alcohol policy. This is not a role any of its members takes lightly or for granted. Members determine the best policy responses for governments based on the available evidence and results. As such, there is indisputable evidence that illicit drug use has been declining among secondary school students for a number of years, and that we already have some of the most effective, school-based programs in place that aim to prepare students for the challenges presented by drugs, now and in the future.

Importing a school-based, drug-testing policy that is not backed up by any evidence that it works, and may even be harmful, defies common sense.

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