

Random Student Drug Testing

How One School Makes it Work

By Veronica Vidal

Now in its 15th year of implementation, the random student drug-testing policy at Homewood-Flossmoor High School, located just outside of Chicago, has become an integral part of a program that addresses drug and alcohol issues using prevention and intervention strategies and treatment referrals.

According to Homewood-Flossmoor's training code, students participating in any interscholastic athletics may be subject to drug testing any time during the calendar year, whether in season or not. Every two weeks, 20 athletes selected at random are tested for alcohol, codeine, amphetamines, marijuana, barbiturates, cocaine, opiates and methadone.

"Drug testing in and of itself is not the only way to go. You need to have a student assistance program that's wrapped around drug testing," says John Schwaller, student assistance coordinator and social worker for the school.

The decision to implement drug testing came in 1989 when the school's football coach began noticing signs of substance use with some of his players, but did not have enough information to confirm his suspicions. School officials proposed a policy to the Board of Education that was passed that year without much opposition due to a 1988 U.S. Court of Appeals decision that upheld mandatory drug testing of high school athletes in Tippecanoe County, Indiana. In 1990, when the policy was implemented, Homewood-Flossmoor High School became the first high school in Illinois to require student drug testing for athletes.

"[Some] parents thought you were out to get their kid," Schwaller said of the response when the program began. "That wasn't the purpose at all. The purpose was safety – safety for the kids, safety for the team."

"The purpose of this policy is to protect the health, welfare and safety of students engaged in interscholastic athletics. It is better to assure the student athlete's health and physical fitness to participate in athletics and not to provide a means which the district may use to punish a student athlete other than by disqualification from participation in interscholastic athletics."

From the Homewood-Flossmoor student athlete policy

Homewood-Flossmoor High School Board Statement on Drug Testing

The school board distinguishes that participation in school-sponsored sports is not an absolute right, but a privilege requiring students and their parents to consent to testing.

On average, a drug test costs approximately \$50 per student, totaling \$1,000 every two weeks. Initially, an anonymous donor supported the drug testing program. Since the school is unable to seek funding through the district, gate proceeds from the school's football games and other sports are now used to continue the program. "It's a creative way of doing it without hurting funding from somewhere else or taking from other sources," Schwaller noted.

The school complements drug testing with other services through its student assistance office. Providing options, student assistance offers in-house support groups for teens recovering from an addiction and teens who know someone with a substance abuse problem. They help athletes who test positive for a substance get the support they need to take control of their situation. Schwaller, who previously worked in treatment, also uses his resources to connect students with the appropriate service providers.

The first step athletes testing positive take includes an assessment by a certified addictions counselor within 48 hours, and the next steps are to follow up with recommendations made by the counselor and re-test. If the student does not follow through with recommendations or is in violation more than once, the consequences range from a two-week suspension from the team to a full-year suspension from all sports.

"You basically can't be caught under the influence, drinking or in possession of tobacco, alcohol, or anything else 24/7, 365 or 366 days out of the year," explained Schwaller.

Student assistance also offers student-run programs including Peer Helpers, a service provided by students trained to work with other students on a one-to-one basis and inform them on the effects of drugs and alcohol. Teens Against Tobacco Use is a program giving students an opportunity to reach out to middle school students about tobacco use. Student assistance also facilitates Operation Snowball, a prevention program focusing on leadership development to empower youth to lead drug-free lives, and provides information sessions on substance abuse and teens to team coaches. Experts train them on what signs to look for, when to intervene and how to get students the help they need.

While maintaining the safety of students, the drug-testing policy simultaneously creates an environment where substance use is not accepted. "I think the response overall has been pretty positive" said Schwaller, emphasizing that a successful drug-testing program simply takes the support of everyone — students, parents and administration.

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