

Just say no to drug testing in schools

OUR OPINION:
Mandatory drug testing for schools delivers more problems than benefits

Schools have been teaching kids that drugs are an expensive habit for years. Now, some schools are learning that drug testing is just as costly, if not more.

The Vernonia School District is learning this lesson the hard way. The district first began mandatory drug testing for athletes in seventh to twelfth grade in 1989 as a way to deter drug use among teens.

Only two years after the policy was enacted, seventh grader James Acton refused to take a drug test, claiming it was a violation of his Fourth Amendment rights. The Vernonia School District soon found itself in the midst of a U.S. Supreme Court battle that would last four years.

Finally in 1995, the Supreme Court ruled that mandatory drug testing was not a violation of a student's privacy, and Vernonia was allowed to continue mandatory drug testing. That could have been the end of the story, but it wasn't.

In an ironic twist, after spending about \$350,000 fighting for the right to give students drug tests, the Vernonia School District is finding out that mandatory drug testing is too expensive and time-consuming to actually enact.

Through January, only the women's basketball team and cheerleading squad had actually been tested for drugs. After a long struggle to gain the right to test students for drugs, the schools in Vernonia aren't doing it.

Trying to cut down on teenage drug use is certainly an admirable goal. And while drug testing may sound like a great way to discourage teenage drug use, as the Vernonia School District discovered, the costs usually outweigh the benefits.

BACKGROUND

■ **1989:** The Vernonia School District starts a policy of testing all seventh through twelfth graders who want to play sports for drug use.

■ **1991:** Seventh grader James Acton refuses to take a drug test. He claims it is a violation of his Fourth Amendment rights against illegal search and seizure. The case is taken to the U.S. Supreme Court.

■ **1995:** The U.S. Supreme Court rules the Vernonia School District has the right to test students for drug use because the school's right to stop drug abuse is greater than the student's right to privacy.

■ **1997:** As of January of this year, only the women's basketball team and the cheerleading squad have been tested for drug use in the Vernonia School District. No random testing has been done.

The Vernonia School District estimated that mandatory drug testing would cost \$2,600 annually. While that makes up only a fraction of the district's \$4.9 million budget, with education budgets tighter than ever, that little bit matters.

Consider the fact that, in the wake of Measure 47, many schools are considering cutting athletics all together. Other schools are now using a "pay to play" philosophy where students must pay money to play sports.

It doesn't make sense to spend extra money on drug testing for athletics when

many schools don't even have enough money for the athletics themselves. Passing a drug test is meaningless for a student if there is no team to play on.

In addition to the financial costs, there are administrative costs as well. It takes time and energy to organize and institute mandatory drug tests. Time and energy that could better be spent on academics.

Even the benefits of mandatory drug testing hardly make it a worthwhile policy for most schools. Sure, random tests will cut down on the number of athletes who use drugs while they are playing sports, but what about the rest of the school?

Certainly there are plenty of drug users who have no interest in sports. For them, mandatory drug testing for athletes really doesn't have much of an effect on their drug use. And even athletes can use drugs during the off season.

If the concern is in athletes using drugs while they're involved with sports, there is a better solution than mandatory drug testing. All students are required to take a physical before they play sports, so why not make a drug test a part of the physical?

This would shift the burden of cost from the school to the perspective athlete, saving the school time and money, while accomplishing the same goal as school enforced drug testing.

The Vernonia School District's experience should be a lesson to other districts that are thinking about mandatory drug testing. While there are benefits to such a system, it takes too much time, energy and money to make it a worthwhile policy.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board

All thumbs



To President Clinton:
With a strike by American Airlines pilots imminent, President Clinton flexed his executive muscle by stepping in and ordering a 60-day cooling off period. The strike would have cost \$200 million a day and left 40,000 travelers stranded, not to mention 90,000 airline workers out of work.

To U2:
The Irish mega-stars are on their way to Autzen stadium. As Eugene scurries to make preparations for the band's arrival, including remodeling Autzen stadium, U2 fans must wait patiently for the band's much anticipated performance in May.



To Congress:
While most of the nation worries about social security, welfare and foreign policy, members of congress are plotting to push for an amendment to ban flag burning in the United States. The question to be answered — why?

To Tony Harding:
Oregon's favorite figure skater is back. Her new claim is that a mysterious man tried to abduct her. It might be time for Tony to step out of the spotlight for the rest of the century so that people forget how much they don't like her.

The Drawing Board

