

Blow or go: High schools using Breathalyzers

BY MARTHA IRVINE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Few teachers at Westwood High School in suburban Boston wanted to chaperone school dances. There were drunken quarrels and dramas. At one school event, a student was rushed to the hospital with alcohol poisoning.

"It's a drag to deal with it," one teacher told assistant principal Emily Parks. And that's how she and other school administrators were feeling, too. "It's frankly kind of frightening when you have students who've had enough to drink that it's presenting a safety problem," Parks said.

So in recent weeks, she and fellow administrators adopted a policy that a growing number of schools are using to deter drinking at after-hours events: They're now testing students who enter school dances, including the upcoming prom, with Breathalyzers.

Some teens complain that the testing policies are intrusive and misdirected. They include 18-year-old Jason Speakman, who thinks officials' efforts would be more effective if they tested

students as they left events to drive home, or increased road patrols.

"Kids getting into cars stumbling drunk — that's a problem," said Speakman, a high school senior in Barrington, R.I., where school officials are considering alcohol tests.

If he were asked to take a test when entering a school event, he said he would refuse — even if he'd had no alcohol. "I just feel like it's a violation of privacy," he said.

In an attempt to be less disruptive, officials at some schools use alcohol testing only on students they suspect have been drinking — ones who might have slurred speech or are chewing a lot of gum to hide the odor.

"Without a Breathalyzer ... you have to be lucky or the kid has to be stupid," said Rich Catrambone, a social worker at Newton South High School in Newton, Mass., where testing is done on a case-by-case basis. "This takes the guess work out of it."

Last fall, officials at the school expanded testing to a night football game, a move that caught

many students off guard and resulted in nine suspensions.

That outcome prompted student newspaper editor Chirag Mundhe to write an editorial suggesting that giving students advance warning would do more to deter underage drinking.

"It really didn't curb the problem; it just punished kids," said Mundhe, a 17-year-old senior.

He's more supportive of the type of policy adopted at nearby Westwood High, where every student entering dances must take a Breathalyzer test.

At North Central High School in Indianapolis, an early adopter of alcohol testing, that's been the rule for 10 years. And Principal C.E. Quandt has never had a student test positive — proof, he says, that students are getting the point.

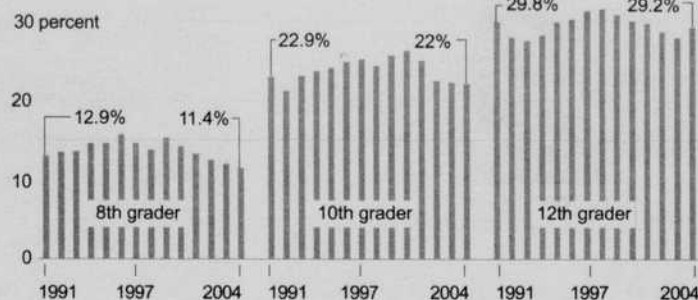
"You can't protect kids 24-7, but you can make the experience they have here a positive one," Quandt said. "We're not going to 'wink-wink' the issue. There is a right and wrong."

Now some parents are following suit.

Binge drinking by teens decreasing

American teenagers were surveyed on their drinking habits. The trend showed a decline from the last decade.

Students who had five drinks or more in a row in the last two weeks



SOURCE: Monitoring the Future study, University of Michigan

AP

Worried about a spate of drunk driving accidents, Steve Sherrets, a father in Independence, Iowa, purchased his own tester, a brand known as Alcohawk, to monitor his two teenage sons.

"At first, they said 'You can believe us,'" Sherrets said of his sons' reactions. "And I said, 'Well, I'm sure that's what the kids told their parents before they got into accidents, too.'"

Traffic deaths rise; seat belt use reinforced

BY KEN THOMAS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The highway fatality rate sank to a record low last year, the government estimated Thursday, but the administration and auto safety advocates bemoaned an increase in the total number of traffic deaths and urged a national focus on seat belt use.

The number of deaths of motorcyclists and drivers and passengers in sport utility vehicles and large trucks increased. Alcohol-related fatalities were projected to decline for the second straight year.

Overall, 42,800 people died on the nation's highways in 2004, up from 42,643 in 2003, according to projections by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Reporting the mixed results, Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta said the nation was "in the midst of a national epidemic" and urged motorists to buckle up.

"If this many people were to die from any one disease in a single year, Americans would demand a vaccine," Mineta said. "The irony is we already

have the best vaccine available to reduce the death toll on our highways — safety belts."

The fatality rate dropped as the total number of traffic deaths crept up because more drivers were on the road.

The fatality rate slid from 1.48 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled in 2003 to 1.46 deaths in 2004. It was the lowest since records were first kept in 1966, when the rate was 5.50 deaths.

Fifty-six percent of those killed weren't wearing seat belts, a rate unchanged from 2003.

NHTSA Administrator Jeffrey Runge said seat belt use is at 80 percent, an all-time high. But he added, "We could save thousands more lives each year if everyone buckled up."

Jacqueline Gillan, vice president for watchdog group Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, called the results "bad news for the American public."

"The government wants us to believe that even though more family members and friends were killed in crashes last year that things are really getting better because we spent more time driving," Gillan said.

"The cold hard reality is that we are stuck in neutral."

The figures were released as Congress considers safety programs in the pending federal highway bill. Runge has sought incentives for states with seat belt laws that let police stop motorists for failing to use belts, or states that reach 90 percent belt use for two years.

In 2004, the number of vehicles registered grew to 235.4 million from 230.8 million in 2003. Vehicle miles traveled increased slightly, from 2.89 trillion in 2003 to 2.92 trillion last year.

Deaths of drivers and passengers in SUVs were projected to grow from 4,446 in 2003 to 4,666 last year, an increase of 4.9 percent. Rollover fatalities in these popular vehicles increased by 6.9 percent to 2,821 in 2004. SUV rollover injuries dropped 3 percent, from 67,000 in 2003 to 65,000 last year.

SUV supporters said that there were roughly 10 percent more registered SUVs on the road in 2004 and that the fatality rate for the vehicles has declined since the late 1990s.

"Things are getting better as it relates to SUVs," said Ron DeFore,

spokesman for the Sport Utility Vehicle Owners of America.

The number of deaths dropped 2.4 percent for people in passenger cars to 18,987 and fell 2 percent for pickup trucks to 5,787. Among large trucks, the number of people killed grew 3.7 percent to 5,169.

Alcohol-related fatalities slid 2.1 percent last year, to 16,654. Wendy Hamilton, president of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, said the organization was "cautiously optimistic" about the report.

However, she said, while the data represented "a step in the right direction, we caution the country, lawmakers and law enforcement not to become complacent about the serious problem of impaired driving in this country."

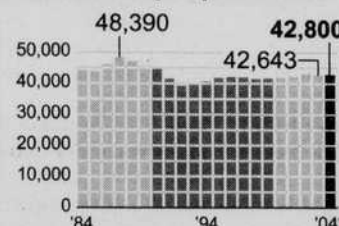
Meanwhile, motorcycle fatalities rose for the seventh straight year, up 7.3 percent to 3,927.

Former NHTSA Administrator Joan Claybrook, who is now president of watchdog group Public Citizen, said the increase in motorcycle deaths was tied to a lack of helmet laws in 30 states.

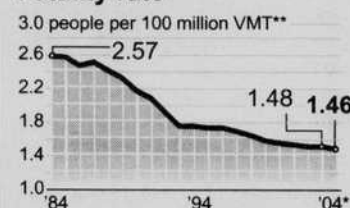
Total traffic deaths up, rate down

While the total number of people killed in a vehicle crash rose, most drove more miles, so the overall fatality rate actually decreased.

Number of people killed



Fatality rate



* Projections ** Vehicle miles traveled

SOURCE: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

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