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**Student drug tests do not work as drug-prevention policy,
but a school's 'positive climate' might**

PHILADELPHIA – A national study of teenagers suggests that school drug testing did not deter them from starting to smoke tobacco or marijuana or drink alcohol. But in high schools that had a “positive school climate,” teens were less likely to start smoking cigarettes or marijuana.

Research published in the January issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* compared the effectiveness over one year of school policies of student drug testing, which are in place in an estimated 20 percent of U.S. high schools, with a positive school climate.

“The bad news is that a policy of drug testing has no effect on students starting to use alcohol, cigarettes or marijuana,” said study co-author Dan Romer, associate director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) at the University of Pennsylvania. “There’s also no effect on escalating the use of those substances.”

The study found, however, that students in schools with a positive school climate reported a lower rate of starting to use cigarettes and marijuana, and a slower escalation of smoking at the one-year follow-up interview. Students in schools with positive climates were 15 percent less likely to start smoking cigarettes and 20 percent less likely to start using marijuana than students at schools without positive climates, the study shows.

A positive school climate is defined in various ways, and includes the students’ perception that schools have clear rules and that there is a sense of caring, respect and connectedness among the students, faculty and staff.

Student drug testing “is a relatively ineffective drug-prevention policy,” wrote the researchers, Dan Romer and Sharon R. Sznitman, an APPC Distinguished Research Fellow and a lecturer at the School of Public Health, University of Haifa, Israel. “On the other hand, interventions that improve school climate may have greater efficacy.” The study added that “whole school” health efforts that engage students, faculty and parents, and promote a sense of security and well-being have been found to reduce substance abuse.

Neither drug testing nor school climate affected the start of drinking alcohol. By the one-year follow-up, about two-thirds of students said they had tried alcohol. The study said that even the positive climate approach may have had no effect because some amount of drinking in this age group has become “normative” behavior and “associated with adjustment in the youth population.”

The study looked at 361 students from the age of 14 to 18 (at the initial interview) in 2008 and 2009, who were first interviewed by phone as part of the National Annenberg Survey of Youth. Of those, 34 percent said their schools had student drug testing policies, and 43 percent said their schools had a positive climate. Drug testing was used more frequently in rural schools (53 percent) and less frequently in schools that were in the Western United States (26 percent); schools were more often said to have a positive climate by students in private schools (75 percent) and less often among 18-to-20-year-old students.

At least 28 percent of U.S. high school students are exposed to student drug testing through school policies, by one estimate. The tests, which may be given randomly or for cause, are often seen applied to students involved in sports or other extracurricular activities with the expectation of a “spillover effect” that will influence other students. But the current study found no general reduction or curtailed escalation of substance use in the general student population.

An issue brief published last fall by the Annenberg Public Policy Center reviews the current evidence on random drug testing in schools. It can be found here:
www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/issue-brief-drug-prevention-in-schools/

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