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Random tests show Hayden students 98% drug-free

High school uses hair tests to check for substance abuse

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Standing in a room at Hayden High School this past month, secretary Linda Donnelly lifted the hair of 18-year-old senior Gabby Marmon, piling it on her head.

Separating a small collection of strands from the rest of Marmon's hair, Donnelly took a pair of sterilized scissors and snipped near the scalp.

Next the strands went into a delicate foil wrapper, then into an envelope and plastic packaging that Marmon and the dean of students, Michael Monaghan, sealed and marked to ensure the sample was labeled correctly.

For more than a year, Hayden has tested students for drug use. Once a month, the school takes hair samples from a pool of students randomly selected by a drug-testing company called Psychemedics.

"I think it's a good deterrent against drugs," Marmon said after helping demonstrate the process.

Monaghan agrees. In the program's first year, the 2012-13 school year, only about 2 percent of drug tests came back positive. That, he says, is great news, because about 18 percent of Hayden's students reported using illegal substances in a survey before the program started.

"It's in the best interests of our kids and our school," he said.

The idea behind launching the drug tests, which cost \$39 per sample, wasn't only to set up a deterrent, says Monaghan, but also to give students an easy reason to say "no" when confronted with peer pressure.

Meanwhile, in cases of positive results, the school contacts parents and refers the student for an evaluation by drug prevention professionals. The student is also barred from participating in or attending the school's extracurricular activities for a month.

Student council president Ryan Spellman, 17, said students sometimes feel nervous about the tests.

"I was scared to death the results would get mixed up," the senior said. "I didn't understand the process."

Now, he says, he thinks the comfort level has increased for many students.

Principal Mark Madsen said that before the school introduced its program, administrators looked at eight schools in Kansas and other states that were already conducting drug tests.

In the end, Hayden chose hair tests over another common option, urinalysis.

"We felt this was the least intrusive and easiest to do," Madsen said.

Additionally, urine tests only identify drug use within the past few days, while hair tests can ferret out a wide variety of substances going back as far as three months, he said.

Monaghan said a "large number" of the school's students are tested but declined to say how many per month. The school doesn't want students to start calculating their odds of being

tested. Some students were tested two or three times last year, while others weren't tested at all.

"They know it's random," Monaghan said. "That's sort of how we've been advised to do the program."

Monaghan and Madsen say some parents and students have had concerns about the program. Before launching the program, the school sought their input through surveys. About 90 percent of parents and 80 percent of students supported the program.

Since then, Monaghan says, parent concerns have dissipated, and they also can request to be present when their child is tested.

Students, meanwhile, can decline to provide a sample, but under the school's policy, doing so is treated the same as testing positive.

Monaghan says it is too early to know the long-term effects of the program, but he is optimistic.

Only 3.6 percent of the school's students reported drug use in a more recent survey, down from the previous figure of 18 percent.

Moreover, Monaghan said, students seem more focused. In the program's first year, he said, the school saw excellent student performance in terms of academics, sports, community service and other activities.

"Achievement last year was at an all-time high," he said. "I would say there's a link."

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