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Drug testing pupils

While drug testing school pupils in the UK has had advocates, it hasn't become a tool that schools have wanted to employ in preventing their pupils having problems with drugs.

A proposed piece of research into the effectiveness of testing failed to find enough schools to take part. Recently the government's advisor on school discipline, Sir Alan Steer, joined the Advisory Council on Drug Misuse in arguing against drug testing this group of young people.

Nevertheless, the current guidance for schools allows headteachers to test pupils on school premises. If they choose to do so, they are advised to involve local partners, including the police, and

consider a set of issues which include thinking through whether testing is a feasible and an effective use of resources.

In this context the Australian National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction's report, 'Drug testing in schools evidence, impacts and alternatives', provides a helpful overview of the evidence. This report adds to the arguments against testing and promotes alternatives, which will help prevent drug use by young people.

In assessing the efficacy of drug testing school pupils, the report states:

"Overall, the body of evidence examined indicates a strong case to be made against drug detection and screening strategies being utilised in the school setting."

Their review of the evidence found that testing is unreliable, costly, morally and legally dubious, and ineffective as a deterrent.

Alternatives to drug testing

Of equal, if not more interest, is what the report has to say about the alternatives to drug testing.

The authors say:

"Drug use by schoolchildren is influenced by a wide range of factors, and there is growing evidence of which drug preventive strategies are likely to be effective in the school setting."

They suggest there are four broad approaches in which schools can play a positive role in preventing drug misuse.

Class room based prevention:

The authors suggest there are four different theoretical models for drug education, (information, decision making, social competency, and harm minimisation) but say that in practice they are often employed together.

They also say that while curriculum based approaches have tended to be disappointing (in terms of changing young people's behaviour) there are challenges in designing effective evaluation and this limits the evidence base.

Whole school approaches:

The authors' assessment of whole school approaches is much less ambiguous. They say that school ethos, such as aiming to creating attachment by young people to the school, acts as a broader approach to prevention, which works on some of the risk and protective factors that are important for drug use.

Targeted intervention

Directing interventions, such as brief interventions and motivational

interviewing, at those most at risk is also seen as an important role for schools. The authors say:

"Where students have personality traits that could predispose them to difficulties with drug misuse, there is evidence that targeted interventions can reduce the potentially negative effects of these traits."

Working with Families

Finally the paper looks at work to support families which they say has some of the strongest evidence of effectiveness. They point out that parents of at risk young people can be hard to engage, but argue that schools may be a useful "launching point" for these programmes.

What can schools achieve?

The authors while being clear that schools have a positive role to play in prevention understand that there are factors beyond their scope. They say:

"Implementation of drug prevention programs in schools without considering the range of broader social influences on drug use is not likely to be effective. In considering the implementation of prevention programs, it is important to be clear about the aims of the program. For example, is the aim of the program to prevent all use of a substance/s or to reduce the harm associated with that use? No single strategy is likely to be effective in and of itself."

In England schools are under a statutory obligation to consider the well-being of their pupils, and will want to spend their resources effectively to achieve this. Working with pupils to enhance their health and paying attention to the risks that young people face through a broad and realistic prevention strategy is likely to be the most effective.