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► [Drug testing in schools evidence, impacts and alternatives.](#)

Roche A.M., Pidd K., Bywood P. et al.
Australian National Council on Drugs, 2008.



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Australian review supports UK guidance indicating that testing school pupils for illegal drugs is a risky procedure of unproven effectiveness and questionable ethics which may backfire by alienating pupils.

Abstract Australia's National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction was commissioned by the Australian National Council on Drugs in March 2007 to undertake an independent, comprehensive and critical examination of all relevant issues involved in drug detection and screening in the school setting. The results of the review are presented in this report.

Overall, the body of evidence examined indicates a strong case to be made against drug detection and screening strategies in schools.

- Most drug tests are insufficiently reliable for use in schools. Accuracy can vary greatly according to conditions and circumstances. Generally a test is considered acceptable if it identifies 90% of people who have actually used the substance being tested for, correctly 'clears' 90% who had not used it, and overall correctly identifies or clears 95% of the people tested. Many tests which might be used in schools fall well below these levels. Even if they did reach these standards, 1 in 10 children would be falsely accused of illicit drug use, risking a range of negative legal, social and psychological consequences which would need to be catered for.
- The cost of testing is very large and would represent a substantial impost on any education system's budget.
- A wide range of moral and legal issues act as serious concerns, if not impediments. In the report consideration was given to the rights of the child, invasion of privacy, protection from assault, and the school's duty of care.
- Prevalence of illicit drug use by schoolchildren is very low, making detection a technically challenging task.
- The highest use levels occur among high risk and vulnerable groups of children, including poorer academic performers and (in Australia) indigenous pupils, suggesting

that punitive and inquisitorial methods of deterrence are ill-advised.

- Evidence indicates that drug testing is an ineffective deterrent. The evidence is limited, derived exclusively from the United States, and poor in quality. No studies provided appropriate controls or baseline data to adequately determine whether changes in the proportions of pupils who tested positive could be attributed to a drug testing programme. Only two studies were found which evaluated impacts on issues such as psychological wellbeing or behavioural and educational outcomes. Of these, one found that while most pupils were undisturbed by the drug testing experience, over a quarter were distressed or angered. The other reported that drug-tested pupils had more negative attitudes and beliefs about drug testing, the school, and drug use outcomes, compared to pupils who had not been tested. Several uninvestigated **potential harms** were also identified.

- An effective array of school-based prevention interventions is now available to schools, offering alternatives to drug testing. The review identified three different but complementary evidence-based strategies schools might implement to prevent drug-related problems among their pupils. These were: supporting and developing connectedness between the child and their school; providing targeted early and brief interventions for high risk youth; and offering family strengthening interventions. Measures that encourage pupils to bond with their schools as social institutions and to form trusting, nurturing relationships with staff and other pupils represent the most important and empirically validated drug prevention strategies available to schools.

In 2009 a [journal article](#) based on the featured review concentrated on whether drug testing does deter use, the accuracy of the tests, and the ethical and legal implications of testing Australian school-aged children.

FINDINGS The review was unable to include a [very recent study](#), the first to randomly allocate schools to testing versus no testing and then to follow up the pupils to test the results. However, had this been available to the reviewers it would simply have strengthened their conclusions. At best the results were inconclusive about impacts on substance use and if anything negative in terms of the pupils' attitudes to risktaking and their beliefs that the authorities were opposed to drug use.

In contrast with the USA, Britain has merely flirted with the idea of testing school pupils for drugs. It was tried in [at least two schools](#) and was recently [being considered](#) by several others, though a planned large scale trial in Kent [fell through](#) when (as the review suspected they might) schools were unwilling to divert funds from other activities. Police sniffer dogs are an alternative also [tried in the UK](#). An [evaluation](#) commissioned by Bedfordshire police concluded that the costs and the risks (among others, of **alienating pupils** and publicly and potentially falsely stigmatising individuals – risks identified in the featured review) were balanced by little in the way of benefits. Pupils in the school where the dogs were used actually became less likely to believe that the experience would deter youngsters from having drugs inside school.

[Official guidance](#) for England published in 2004 did not explicitly rule out testing or sniffer dogs but did advise "extreme caution" and raised serious concerns such as whether such measures are consistent with a school's pastoral responsibilities. None of the recent UK national policies (for [England](#), [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#)) mentioned these measures, a sign perhaps that initial governmental interest has receded. If so this would

be in line with [expert opinion](#) from the UK government's drug advisers who recommended against sniffer dogs and testing in schools. As in Australia, in the virtual absence of research, their concerns were over ethics, practicality, cost, and the potential impact on relationships with pupils. Overall, the slim evidence to date and these other concerns give no reason to subject pupils to drug testing or examination by sniffer dogs at random or without cause.

Thanks for their comments on this entry in draft to Ann Roche of the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction at Flinders University in Australia. Commentators bear no responsibility for the text including the interpretations and any remaining errors.

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