

One of the most controversial issues to be dealt with in forthcoming guidance from the Department for Education and Skills is **testing school pupils for drugs**. A draft raises serious issues which might make some schools reconsider, such as whether testing is consistent with their pastoral responsibilities. Now US research questions whether testing actually deters drug use.¹ Researchers extracted drug use data from national surveys of about 75,000 pupils in grades eight, ten and 12 (spanning the teenage years) in over 700 schools, then matched this with information on drug testing policies obtained from over 80% of the same schools. Over the years 1998 to 2001 about a fifth of schools tested pupils. Whether schools tested at all, and whether they tested on suspicion of drug use, were both unrelated to whether pupils had used cannabis in the past 12 months and the number of times they had done so. The same was true when the focus was narrowed to male school athletes or to 'experienced' cannabis users. Use of other illicit drugs was also unrelated to testing. The researchers acknowledge the possibility that schools which instituted testing did so because they had high rates of drug use and that testing reduced these to average levels, but comment that this seems unlikely, and the study is being interpreted as the most solid evidence to date that testing pupils does not deter drug use. The study did not assess whether testing deterred pupils from using or being under the influence of drugs actually at school. However, if this had occurred, experienced cannabis users (who on average had used the drug 20 or more times in the past year) should have been able to fit in more use occasions in schools which did not test. There was no hint of this.

1 Yamaguchi R. *et al.* "Relationship between student illicit drug use and school drug-testing policies." *Journal of School Health*: 2003, 73(4), p. 159–164. Copies: apply DrugScope.