

SAFE SCHOOLS

Drug Testing or Behavioral Assessments?

By Harvey Lee

One way of addressing drug problems in schools is through drug testing. Some educators believe that this approach will reduce the number of students who use drugs. But does drug testing prevent drug use?

In a 2003 study published in the *Journal of School Health*, Ryoko Yamaguchi, Lloyd Johnston, and Patrick O'Malley explored this question. They found no relationship between drug testing and students' drug use. (See *Relationship Between Student Illicit Drug Use and School Drug-Testing Policies*, available at www.openminds.com/indres/SchoolDrug2003.pdf.) Student attitudes and behaviors, however, are valid predictors of drug use.

Behavioral and attitudinal assessment, combined with student counseling, is a better approach than drug testing. Student Assistance Programs (SAPs) provide an opportunity for adults to listen to what students have to say about drug use. During these discussions, educators are able to conduct informal assessments.

If drug testing is being considered at your school, you should review a 2002 report by the Office of National Drug Control Policy called *What You Need to Know About Drug Testing in Schools* (www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/drug_testing). The report suggests that schools should take steps to ensure community support before they commit to the process. In addition, they should document the need for drug testing, secure an attorney familiar with case law, and enlist the assistance of drug treatment counselors. Most importantly, the report emphasizes that "drug testing is not to trap and punish students who use drugs . . . it is to prevent drug dependence and to help drug dependent students become drug free" (p. 16).

I leave you with the following questions:

- Do we need drug testing or behavioral and attitudinal assessments in our schools?
- Are our schools providing adequate counseling and treatment for students who need help with drug abuse?

Harvey Lee is a Program Specialist for the Pacific Regional Comprehensive Assistance Center.