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More funds go to school drug-testing

By Andy Sullivan

REUTERS

WASHINGTON — Student athletes, musicians and others who participate in after-school activities could increasingly be subject to random drug testing under a program promoted by the Bush administration.

White House officials say drug testing is an effective way to keep students away from harmful substances like marijuana and crystal methamphetamine, and have held seminars across the country to promote the practice to local school officials.

But some parents, educators and school officials call it a heavy-handed, ineffective way to discourage drug use that undermines trust and invades students' privacy.

"Our money should be going toward educating young people, not putting them under these surveillance programs," said Jennifer Kern, a research associate at the Drug Policy Alliance, a nonprofit group that has frequently criticized U.S. drug policy.

Requiring students to produce a urine sample or hair sample for laboratory testing is a relatively recent tactic in the United States' decades-long "war on drugs," along with surveillance cameras and drug-sniffing dogs in school hallways.

Adults in the military and many workplaces have long been subject to testing, but U.S. courts have ruled that public schools cannot impose random tests on an entire student body.

The Supreme Court ruled in 1995 that schools can randomly test student athletes who are not suspected of drug use, and in 2002 ruled that all students who participate in voluntary activities, like cheerleading, band or debate, could be subjected to random tests.

Since then, the Bush administration has spent \$8 million to help schools pay for drug-testing programs. The White House hopes to spend \$15 million on drug-testing grants in the next fiscal year.

Roughly 600 school districts now use drug tests out of about 15,000 nationwide, according to officials from the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.

White House officials liken drug testing to programs that screen for tuberculosis or other diseases, and said students who test positive don't face criminal charges.

The threat of a drug test also helps students resist peer pressure, said John Horton, an associate deputy director at the drug-control office.

Studies are mixed on the programs' effectiveness.

Several individual schools reported declines in student drug use after implementing random testing, and a survey of 65 Indiana principals found drug use decreased at more than half of the schools where testing occurred.

But a 2003 national survey of 76,000 students found no difference in drug use between schools that test students and those that don't.

Illicit drug use remained steady among high school students between 1997 and 2004, with roughly half of high school seniors saying they had tried illicit drugs at some point, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

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