

## **Manatee to Drug Test Student Athletes**

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MANATEE COUNTY — High school athletes and even cheerleaders in Manatee schools will be randomly tested for recreational drug and alcohol use this fall under a new program that will be among the strictest in Florida.

The district is one of three in the state that received a federal grant to test students on varsity sports teams for use of alcohol, marijuana, cocaine and heroin.

Officials say testing will help students stay drug free by giving them a cast-iron reason to say 'no' when friends are pressuring them to drink or use.

As many as 50 percent of Manatee's high school athletes and cheerleaders, about 1,000 students, will take urine tests during the upcoming school year. The tests will also include an alcohol breath test.

Students who test positive will not face expulsion or suspensions, but will be barred from competing in school sports for time periods that lengthen with each positive test.

They will also be required to undergo counseling or drug treatment if they want to play again. Sarasota and Charlotte schools do not have drug testing programs in place.

Some experts warn that the testing targets students who are unlikely to abuse substances, and they say the money would be better spent on drug education.

But Manatee officials applied for the \$103,000 federal grant because they believe drug use by county students is above the state average, said Skip Wilhoit, a teacher with Manatee's Safe and Drug-Free Schools program. Forty-eight other grants were awarded nationally.

In a 2006 state survey, almost 35 percent of Manatee students said they had used alcohol in the past month, and about 13 percent admitted to smoking marijuana.

"It's designed to catch the students who have problems with this," Wilhoit said. "If you go ahead and use when you're subject to random testing, you obviously have a problem."

Some school officials also argue that the testing will make sports safer for athletes, and even for cheerleaders whose sport includes being thrown into the air.

But there is disagreement about how effective testing programs are.

A nationwide study of 76,000 students in 2001 found that that testing did not reduce the number of middle and high schoolers using illegal drugs.

Critics argue that testing increases distrust between students and their schools, and that it does not target students most in need of help.

Money for testing would be better spent on drug education or on counseling for students with drug problems, said Marsha Rosenbaum, a medical sociologist with the Drug Policy Alliance, a New York nonprofit group that advocates for access to drug treatment.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that testing causes some students to drop out of school sports, Rosenbaum said.

"If you've got a kid who wants to play baseball but doesn't want to be drug tested, don't you want to keep them in baseball?" she asked.

The debate over testing student-athletes has come up in several states. Matthews County schools in Virginia investigated drug testing a few years back after losing six members of its baseball team for drinking. Administrators and parents there decided it was the responsibility of the parents to stop their children from using drugs.

"Schools can't do everything for parents; we finally came to that conclusion," said former Superintendent Harry Ward.

Around 600 Florida high school students competing in football, baseball, softball and weightlifting were tested for steroid use during the the last school year in a state-funded program.

Only one student, a football player, produced a positive test. Legislators did not renew funding for the program during this year's legislative session. The Manatee program does not test for steroid use.

In 2004, Sarasota Military Academy launched a recreational drug-testing program for all students, faculty and staff. Principal Dan Kennedy said the program produced about three positive tests per year.

"I think it should be done at every school and for all the student population," Kennedy said. "I've had students come to me with tears in their eyes saying it's given them the power to say no."

Under Manatee's new program, athletes and cheerleaders who refuse to sign a testing consent form would not be allowed to take part in sports.

Students chosen to be tested will be called to the school clinic, asked to empty their pockets and then supply a urine sample and perform an alcohol breath test. The testing is done in the clinic. Positive test results will be shared with the student, their parents, the athletic director, the principal and coaches, but not law enforcement.

Some parents and students in Manatee said they support the program.

"Other kids probably won't like it; they'll think it's ridiculous, but if it stops the athletes from doing the wrong thing, then it's the right thing," said Michael Ohlman, a catcher for Lakewood Ranch High's baseball team.

Stacey Horton, coach of Braden River High's cheerleading squad, said testing would help teachers spot students abusing prescription drugs, among the trendier drugs.

"It's not marijuana — they're taking pills," Horton said. "It's hidden; you can't smell it, you can't detect these medications."

From 1995 to 2001, Manatee High School tested its athletes for recreational drugs, paying for testing kits with money from gate receipts and school booster funds. The program was in place at that school because football coach Joe Kinnan felt strongly that it was a way to keep students clean and allow them to serve as role models for others.

"The feedback I got from other students was, 'Coach, this is making a difference,'" Kinnan said.