

Random drug test policy changes proposed

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Recommendation for changes in Holyoke School District's random drug testing (RDT) program were presented to the local school board at its Dec. 15 meeting.

The revised policy will return to the Jan. 19 board meeting for first reading.

Random drug testing was implemented for grade 7-12 participants in extra-curricular activities in the 2008-09 school year.

An outside audit of the RDT program, focusing on the student selection process, was completed this past September. As a result, the original RDT study committee was called back into action to review the recommendations.

After three months of work, the committee's recommendations for change were presented at last week's board meeting by Supt. Bret Miles, board RDT committee representative Kris Camblin and principal Susan Ortner.

Changes recommended

Miles pointed out revisiting the philosophy was an important part of the dialog throughout the process. While the policy includes consequences and provides help for a student who needs it, the committee consensus is the main purpose of the policy is a deterrent.

Whether it's the issue around the bottle of water, changing the consequence for a first offense or record keeping, Miles emphasized the policy revisions are suggested with the student and his or her privacy at the forefront.

Camblin noted a change in the testing, in that all students selected for RDT will be screened for both drugs and alcohol. This past year, that was random, as well.

Camblin highlighted the suggested policy revisions, noting the committee utilized information

Random drug test policy changes proposed

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

from students, families, staff and community members to revisit several aspects of the policy. Changes were made in the draft policy after many conversations and careful consideration.

Instead of a bottle of water being taken to the students selected for RDT on a given day, the committee recommended students be called to the office.

They will be informed they will be tested that day and offered a bottle of water. They may choose to use the water or not or to fill up their own water bottle to reduce any unwanted attention to their selection.

A major change in the RDT draft policy centers around consequences for a first positive test. With the intent of the policy being deterrence rather than “catching” students, the committee suggests there not be monthly follow-up tests for a first positive test.

“We felt it was right not to assume that any positive test is necessarily a drug or alcohol problem,” said the committee’s recommendation.

A student will still be required to provide a clean test, go through the intake process with Centennial Mental Health (CMH) and follow the activities/athletic handbook consequences after a first positive test.

Miles added the committee felt these are no small consequences for a first offense, and didn’t feel the 12-month follow-up testing is necessary.

Ortner added a color line is part of CMH’s standard operating procedures. With this, if a student is involved in monthly testing, he or she would have to call in every day to see if his or her color was up for testing that day. Ortner pointed out the school district has no control over this, as it’s the way CMH operates.

Language has been added describing the process of the parent meeting. It was determined the

Random drug test policy changes proposed

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

district needs to take some time to explain to the family and student what can be expected when they go to CMH for the intake assessment.

In fact, Miles said CMH has developed a brochure just for this, to give families an idea of what to expect.

Self disclosure in lieu of testing was added to the policy section on refusal to submit to a drug use test. This gives a student the opportunity to not test if they know it will be positive. It will be treated as a positive-test offense. The original policy did not list the consequence of admitting, so it has been added to be clear.

Camblin also cited a change in recordkeeping, with the committee suggesting all records be kept for a period of seven years.

The former policy would prohibit an audit by destroying records annually. The district keeps other sensitive records for seven years, and that time period would also cover a student's time in the RDT program, from grades 7-12.

Miles said considerable committee conversation was devoted to how to judge whether RDT program is successful.

In looking to continuous quality improvement, the RDT committee recommended an outside audit be completed annually.

At the end of the report, board member Kim Killin said there's been tremendous effort to balance student rights with the outcome. Due to the substantial changes in policy suggested this year, she would recommend an audit at least one more year, then determine the need after that.

Audit recommendations met

Random drug test policy changes proposed

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

Supt. Miles said he feels each of the nine recommendations from the audit were met. CMH's second selection method of close eyes and point was discontinued immediately.

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for both CMH and the school district have been outlined and written down to better clarify the procedures.

CMH's regional director will meet with school district staff twice a year to review paperwork. All CMH semi-annual reports will be signed and dated by the principal, who will continue to serve as the RDT coordinator, with support from the superintendent.

Additional staff may be involved without compromising the confidentiality of the process. This involvement will include such tasks as date-stamping forms and keeping track of CMH's submission of required written documents.

Both the policy and SOP call for the superintendent to oversee the program in specific ways.

In continuing to improve quality, the committee thoroughly considered and defined scope of tests, drug monitoring frequency and randomization requirements for test dates.