



Last modified: Monday, July 13, 2009 11:57 PM MDT

Goshen parents missing the point on drug testing

Originally published in the Wyoming Tribune Eagle on July 14, 2009

The Goshen County school board stands up for the children in its district, and what does it get in return? A lawsuit.

That's right. The trustees of Goshen County School District 1 in Torrington this past April passed a random alcohol and drug testing policy. It applies to all students in non-academic programs at the high schools and middle schools in Torrington, Lingle-Fort Laramie and Yoder.

The intent is to reduce drug abuse in the schools, perhaps salvaging young lives and protecting peers, who should not have to put up with drug abusers beside them in classrooms.

But last week some 50 Goshen County students and parents filed suit in state district court against the school board. They assert that random drug testing is unconstitutional, violating the U.S. Constitution's Fourth (banning unreasonable search and seizure) and 14th (assuring equal protection under the law) amendments.

Yes, no good deed goes unpunished.

According to articles from the Torrington Telegram, the drug policy, which is modeled after a similar one in Scottsbluff, Neb., was debated for more than five months before being finalized. It would keep students' information confidential, and users would not be punished academically.

When the trustees passed it, they argued the policy is one "piece in the puzzle" in the fight against teen drug abuse. But some parents responded that it is coercive and disrespectful of students. They also asserted it violates the young people's rights.

However, one problem with that position is the U.S. Supreme Court upheld random drug testing for students in 2002. The justices said such programs violate neither the protection against illegal searches nor their guarantee of equal protection. They basically said students' access to extracurricular activities is a privilege, not a right.

Besides, drug testing is good for schools -- and for students. Listen to former White House deputy drug czar Dr. Bertha Madras when asked about the effectiveness of such programs:

"My overall thought is random student drug testing, above all, is a form of prevention. It gives kids an excuse to say no. ... So that's number one. Number two is if kids, in fact, test positive, it helps them get parents involved and a counselor involved. And if kids are, in fact, addicted, it helps them get specialty treatment. So it works for everyone."

One problem with the Goshen program is its costs, about \$11,000 a year. But the district intends to fund it through a Drug-Free Schools grant.

It's disappointing to see parents fighting against a policy that can make their schools better. It's also deplorable that additional districts -- including both Laramie County School Districts 1 and 2 -- are not discussing similar programs.

Here's hoping that more school boards in Wyoming take a stand by at least debating the issue of random drug testing. To not do so is to sentence some young people to a lifetime of substance abuse.