

RESOLVED: "In the U.S., public high school athletes should undergo mandatory random drug testing."



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Official wants Texas high school athletes tested

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AUSTIN, Texas — Texas is a hotbed of high school football, where the Friday night lights burn brighter and many of the athletes are among the biggest, fastest and strongest in the country.

A key state leader is pushing to make Texas kids the cleanest athletes as well.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, a Republican, is proposing a sweeping mandatory random testing program in public schools for steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs.

And it would go far beyond football. Athletes in baseball, basketball, track and other sports likely would be tested, too.

If approved, it would be the nation's largest program of its kind at the high school level, with tens of thousands of students tested every year.

"It will save lives. That's the whole purpose," Dewhurst said. "I'm convinced steroid use in high schools is greater than people want to admit."

The question is whether local school districts, a powerful lobby at the state Capitol, will want to go along. They have resisted in the past.

"Many schools would say they have a bigger problem with alcohol and other drugs," said Charles Breithaupt, athletic director for the University Interscholastic League, the governing body for Texas public school sports. "A lot of them think this is a local issue and way below the radar."

Dewhurst's proposal wouldn't be the first of its kind — New Jersey started a testing program last fall — but it would be the biggest.

Texas had 733,026 students participate in public school sports during the 2005-06 school year, more than any other state.

The New Jersey program only tests athletes who qualify for state championships. Dewhurst envisions a much broader, season-long program in Texas, although he has yet to reveal details.

That's when the questions over local control, student privacy, punishments for failed tests and other issues must be answered. Some Texas schools already are testing, and their numbers are growing. Of about 1,300 member schools, a UIL survey in 2005 found that 53 schools tested athletes for steroids. By 2006, that number rose to 127.

The 2005 survey also asked the schools that didn't test: "Why not?"

More than half said it was either too expensive or because they did not think steroids are a problem on their campus. Only 39 schools said they considered steroids a problem on their teams.

Of the schools with testing programs in place, only one of 4,100 tests performed in 2005 came back positive for steroids.

And when asked who should decide whether to test, more than 800 schools said it should be handled locally.

School districts worried about cost — the tests can run up to \$200 each — scuttled a playoffs-only testing proposal in 2005.

With the low rate of positive results at the schools that do test, they wonder if it is worth the money, Breithaupt said.

A state study of substance abuse among 141,000 Texas students in grades seven through 12 conducted by Texas A&M University found that steroid use fell from 2 percent in 2004 to 1.5 percent in 2006. Among 12th graders, it went down from 2.4 percent to 1.8 percent.

Tremain Smith, a lanky 17-year-old senior long jumper at Dallas Wylie High School, said he's never taken performance-enhancing drugs or competed against anybody he suspected of taking them. But he thinks testing is a good idea and would be a deterrent.

His father, Julian, a junior ROTC instructor at the school, agreed.

"I think they should test," Julian Smith said. "These kids these days are trying to buff up their bodies and get bigger and faster."

Dewhurst said schools should be willing to go along if the state pays the bill.

Texas lawmakers began the current legislative session with a \$14.3 billion budget surplus for the next two years. A random sampling of 30,000 students, about 4 percent of athletes statewide, at \$200 each would cost about \$6 million.

"You can't put a price tag on a young person's life," Dewhurst said.

But there's more than money at stake. Schools also worry about privacy — how to collect a urine sample from a 14-year-old female freshman runner, for example — penalties and the litigation that might ensue. Routine disqualifications over eligibility often end up in court.

A look at the New Jersey program might satisfy some of those concerns.

New Jersey contracts with the National Center for Drug Free Sport in Kansas City, Mo., to collect samples and send them to a lab at UCLA. Students and a parent must sign a consent form before the season. The form includes a list of banned substances.

New Jersey randomly selects athletes who qualify for team or individual state championships. The state will test about 500 students this school year.

"It forced parents to take a look at the substances that were banned and maybe take a look at what their children were ingesting," said Bob Baly, assistant director of the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association.

To protect student privacy, samples are collected by a monitor of the same sex as the athlete. The athlete must take off most of his or her exterior clothing but is allowed to step into a closed stall to urinate. At the college and professional levels, the monitor watches the athlete produce the urine sample. "We have not violated their rights," Baly said.

Athletes caught with banned substances must sit out competition for a year and attend counseling. Although students and their families are notified, overall results aren't made public until the end of the school year.

Rather than catch a lot of cheaters, Baly said, New Jersey officials hope the program's real impact will be keeping kids from taking steroids or other drugs in the first place.

"They are worried about being caught and being labeled as the cheater," Baly said. "Adolescents, if you tell them speeding is dangerous, they're still going to speed. If you tell them about the cop around the corner with the radar gun, hopefully they slow down. It's the fear of being caught."

Dewhurst's plan has drawn support from Don Hooton, who became an activist for steroid testing after his son Taylor committed suicide at the age of 17. Doctors said they believe Taylor Hooton became depressed after he stopped using steroids.

"I hope his plan to curb steroid use in Texas will become a model for this nation," Hooton said at a Dewhurst campaign stop. D.W. Rutledge, president of the 18,500-member Texas High School Coaches Association, said he believes coaches do a good job steering athletes away from steroids.

Rutledge hasn't surveyed his organization's members, but said coaches would likely have the same worries as school administrators about how such a program would work.

He also said testing would probably be a good thing for the students.

"It gives them a chance to escape the peer pressure, to say 'I can't get involved with that,'" Rutledge said. "It gives them an out."