

Backed by Tony Blair on the basis of US evidence, the Abbey School became the first state school in Britain to randomly drug test its pupils. **Max Daly** investigates what *really* happened in the US and the problems facing schools which want to test pupils

Testing times

THE movement to introduce random drug testing in UK schools is gathering pace. On January 5, a day after returning from their Christmas holidays, children at the Abbey School in Kent became the first state pupils in Britain to be subjected to random drug tests. Abbey's head teacher Peter Walker, whose six-month experiment using saliva swabs is being funded by the *News of the World*, said he hoped Abbey would be the first of many schools to test its pupils.

Despite being met with distaste and distrust by civil rights groups, teachers' unions, student bodies and some parents and head teachers, random testing has the enthusiastic backing of the government. Testing, it is said, gives peer-pressured pupils a reason to refuse drugs. Critics say it's a violation of children's privacy and civil rights and a cynical reputation-boosting marketing ploy that forces drug use underground.

The introduction of random testing at Abbey follows the rapid expansion in the use of sniffer dogs in UK schools. In May last year a *Druglink* investigation found at least 100 schools were using sniffer dogs. In November 50,000 parents in Sunderland were sent a letter advising them that dogs would be sent into their children's schools.

Abbey habit:
Kent school
could be first
of many to test
its children

CABINET BACKING

Tony Blair's declared support for random testing last year was taken a step further by home secretary Charles Clarke in January, during the reading of the new drugs bill. In an unreported exchange with his Tory counterpart David Davis – whose party is calling for compulsory testing a year after denouncing Blair's plans as "headline grabbing" – Clarke responded to an accusation that the guidance to schools on testing was overly cautious by saying: "On the contrary, we positively encourage it."

So Blair and Clarke are sold on random, suspicion-free drug testing at school. But why? Supporters of the tactic say proof that random testing is an effective way of keeping children away from drugs and drugs away from schools is available from the States – where the practice has ballooned since a Supreme Court ruling in 1995 cleared the way for schools to test the urine of young athletes.

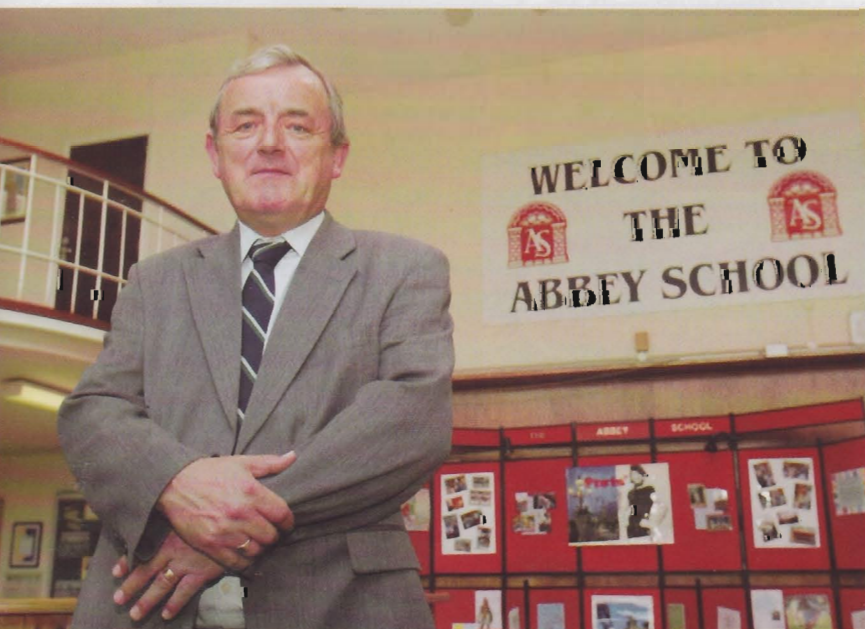
Now hundreds of US schools require students to submit to random tests before allowing them a parking space, to join the chess club, the cheerleading squad or any other extra curricular activity. President Bush, encouraged by another Supreme Court ruling in 2002 which said random, suspicionless testing was not in contravention of the fourth amendment, last year expanded the budget for student drug testing programmes ten-fold to \$23 million.

WAFER THIN

But the conviction, on both sides of the Atlantic, that random testing achieves what it sets out to do is not supported by the evidence: a fact which contradicts the UK Drug Strategy pledge to develop new initiatives only on the basis of clear evidence.

A report published in February by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation revealed that a succession of studies in the US have failed to provide a convincing case for testing. "Whilst the theory behind drug testing is plausible enough, the evidence for it is remarkably thin. It is a matter of concern that student drug testing has been widely developed in the US and may conceivably be so within the UK on the basis of the slimmest available research evidence," says report author Neil McKegany, Professor of Drug Misuse Research at the University of Glasgow.

The three main US studies which make up the body of evidence used by Tony Blair, the US National Drug Control Strategy, numerous testing kit



manufacturers, head teachers and American pro-testing pressure groups such as the Student Drug-Testing Coalition (SDTC) to validate the policy are, McKeganey says, not only fundamentally flawed as independent pieces of research, but biased. The three studies were overseen by Lisa Brady and Joseph McKinney – both members of the SDTC, and therefore advocates for student testing.

The Bush Administration gives considerable prominence to the results from research at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in New Jersey. Pupils completed three questionnaires: when a random testing programme was implemented in 1997, suspended as a result of court action initiated by the American Civil Liberties Union in 1999 and reinstated following a successful defence of the action in 2002.

US STUDIES

The survey results, compiled by Brady, showed an increase in drug use while the tests were suspended. But McKeganey questions the reliability of students self-reporting their own drug use, the lack of comparable data from similar schools and that in some cases heavy marijuana use actually decreased when tests were suspended. "It is impossible to attribute the various changes in reported drug use to the effects of the drug testing programme," he concludes.

McKinney, a professor of education at Ball State University, Indiana has published two studies which support the effectiveness of testing. A survey of 83 American school principals who conducted testing on their pupils concluded it was a "strong tool" for reducing drug use among teens and made it easier for children to decline drugs from friends. Yet McKeganey says: "There is simply no way that school principals' views about the level of drug use in their school can be cited as evidence of the effectiveness of a testing programme to reduce teenage drug use."

The second study compared two high schools in Columbus, Ohio. One had a testing programme and one did not. McKinney reported the school which tested expelled less children, had better exam results, pupils felt safer and disapproved of marijuana more. McKeganey dismisses the study because he says it is difficult to see how such statements offer any proof that the differences between schools are down to drug testing.

While Bush and Blair use shaky research to back up the expansion of testing in schools, they have ignored the most comprehensive ever study on the subject. *Monitoring the Future*, a federally-funded survey of youth drug use published in 2003, studied statistics from 75,000 students at 700 schools to gauge the effectiveness of testing in schools. It found no evidence that schools engaged in random testing were more effective in deterring drug use than those that didn't. Rates of drug use at testing and non-testing schools were virtually identical. Daryl Johnson, one of the study's authors, concluded that the results "raise a serious question of whether drug testing is a wise investment of scarce resources".

PRIVATE SECTOR

Although many independent schools in the UK carry out testing on pupils only if they are caught with

drugs, few carry out random testing and there has been no published research on the effects of these programmes. But a former pupil of Hurtwood House, a private sixth form school in Surrey which carries out random tests, told *Druglink* some students swapped cannabis for cocaine because the stimulant clears quickly from the body.

"There was random drug testing of about five people every Monday morning. If it came up positive then you would just be straight out the door, there was no negotiation, nothing," he said. "You got people who did cocaine instead of smoking spliff because when you go out on a Friday night cocaine is not going to be in your system on Monday morning. There were a couple of people while I was there who were caught. You find out through word of mouth that they had gone in for drug testing and vanished. We didn't even see them."

The former pupil, who did not want to be named, alleges that the tests were not entirely random. "There was the sense that they were not going to test you if they wanted to keep you there. I was one of the popular people that you could have thought was taking drugs and I think because I was an A-grade student I was never tested."

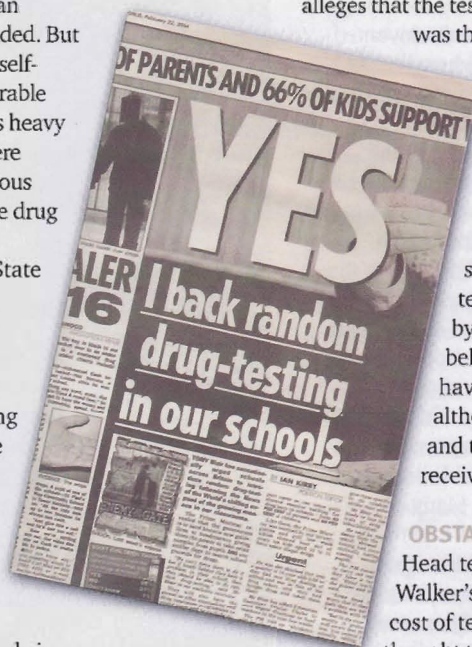
Abbey head teacher Peter Walker said the success of his six-month testing programme will be measured by "exclusions, exam results and pupil behaviour". So far all Abbey pupils who have been tested have been clean, although one pupil who refused a test and then admitted to taking drugs has received counselling.

OBSTACLES

Head teachers who want to follow in Walker's footsteps will have to consider the cost of testing – the six-month trial at Abbey is thought to cost around £6,000 – but also the threat of legal action by pupils and parents. In the US around 30 schools have abandoned testing programmes because of community opposition, cost and lack of results. According to the SDTC, there have been at least 40 court cases in the US whereby school testing programmes have been challenged by pupils for violating the US Constitution. Most rulings favoured the school, although many have been expensive. In April last year the lawyers for two Oregon students received a \$90,000 settlement after challenging testing of athletes at a high school.

Schools will also have to contend with their students. In February the English Secondary Students' Association (ESSA) – the first representative body for 11–19 year-old pupils in England – was launched. Examining random drug testing is one of its top three priorities, with 80 per cent of student delegates against the tactic. National Co-ordinator Rajeeb Dey said ESSA will ask all Abbey School pupils to vote on the issue. "If we find they are not happy we will have to speak to the school," said Dey. "Alongside bullying, the use of random drug testing and sniffer dogs is one of the most important issues facing students today. We need to discuss the reasons why testing is being implemented because there may be alternatives that are better." ■

Blair's backing: PM gave support for testing in the *News of the World* last February



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PETE was a long-term heroin user. Unlike many other heroin users he did not use crack and other drugs with it. When he was given a bed at a large central London hostel he moved there off the streets, glad to be in a place that was clean and warm though rather institutionalised. But Pete found his new environment far from tranquil. The majority of other residents at the hostel were using heroin and crack along with a range of other drugs. At breakfast time scores of residents who had spent the night bingeing on crack surrounded him begging for heroin to ease their jittery comedown.

Intimidated and ill at ease by so much unwanted attention he went back to the streets where he had his own spot away from the more chaotic users who revolved endlessly between hostel and street. The government paid £300 a week in housing benefit for his place in the hostel but he found that he could get more peace and quiet sleeping under a bridge. Eventually supported by a worker at the needle exchange he used regularly he clawed his way to the top of a housing association waiting list, switched from heroin to a methadone script ending his contact with dealers, moved into a peaceful one-bedroom flat in a London suburb and lived happily ever after.

Not everyone manages to move out of the hostel system so successfully though. Hostels provide a vital and valuable service for a very vulnerable section of society which has nowhere else to go. Many do valuable work helping residents to move on to more permanent accommodation and to address mental health issues and problematic patterns of drug and alcohol use. But the complex nature of the needs of those who use hostels makes it very difficult to break the destructive spiral of poverty, addiction and despair many find themselves in. And peer group pressure can simply reinforce and compound destructive patterns of behaviour.

DRUG SCENE

Paul, 34, said that the hostels he had lived in had a very relaxed attitude to drugs. "When staff found a crack pipe in my room they gave me a formal warning but they didn't create any real problems for me. Let's face it, most people who live in hostels are addicted to Class A drugs. If you want to avoid drugs you need to avoid hostels or at the very least ignore everyone who lives in them. There are so many different drugs circulating in hostels that it's hard to avoid temptation. Hostels should introduce drug-free wings like they have in prisons so that people who really do want to stop using drugs get a chance to do so."

He said that while he had found hostel staff helpful in providing advice about stabilising a drug habit or coming off drugs the chances of actually achieving this goal while living in a hostel were slim. "The government needs to know that if they fund someone to go into detox and rehab, and afterwards send them straight back to a hostel, they're wasting their money. Lots of people who have just got clean can be using



Mark Harvey

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There are rotas in hostels for drug-taking sessions depending on who's got their giro that day

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again within an hour of getting back to a hostel – as soon as someone knocks on their door offering them gear.”

Andy, from south London, has been using heroin, cocaine, cannabis and a variety of prescription pills for more than a decade. He has had drug-free periods but has always ended up using again. He believes that a combination of factors makes it impossible for him to stop using. "The truth is I like taking gear but I just don't like all the crap which goes with it. Apart from the streets there's no other place than hostels for users like me to stay. I nearly lost my leg last year. I got septicaemia and pneumonia as a result of injecting in my groin but it didn't put me off using. The hardest thing is getting away from your circle of friends. I was born and bred in this area and everyone I know takes drugs."

ENTRENCHED

He says there are various ways by which living in a hostel can move a person's drug use up one or more notches. "I knew someone who got thrown out of a hostel for smoking cannabis. As a result of being made homeless he got in with a crowd living on the streets who were using heroin and crack. Sometimes people