



VICTORIAN ALCOHOL AND DRUG ASSOCIATION

**Submission to the National Research
Centre on AOD Workforce Development**

**CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS: DRUG DETECTION AND
SCREENING IN SCHOOLS**

July 2007

Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association

211 Victoria Parade
Collingwood, VIC 3066

Ph: (03) 9416 0899

Fax: (03) 9416 2085

vaada@infoxchange.net.au

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) is the peak body for alcohol and other drug (AOD) services in Victoria. We provide advocacy, leadership, information and representation on AOD issues both within and beyond the AOD sector.

VAADA's membership comprises agencies working in the AOD field, as well as those individuals who are involved in, or have a specific interest in, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, or research that minimises the harms caused by alcohol and other drugs.

As a state-wide peak organisation, VAADA has a broad constituency. Our membership and stakeholders include 'drug specific' organisations, consumer advocacy organisations, hospitals, community health centres, primary health organisations, disability services, religious services, general youth services, local government and others, as well as interested individuals.

VAADA's Board is elected from the membership and comprises a range of expertise in the provision and management of alcohol and other drug services and related services.

As a peak organisation, VAADA's purpose is to ensure that the issues for both people experiencing the harms associated with alcohol and other drug use, and the organisations that support them, are well represented in policy and program development and public discussion

Initial comments

Further to recent inquiries, VAADA is disappointed to note that there were no extensions to the deadline to the National Research Centre on AOD Workforce Development's call for submissions on Drug Detection and Screening in Schools. NCETA informed VAADA that it had refused several requests for extensions to the deadline

Organisations in the community sector are generally understaffed, pressed for time, and dealing with many competing demands. When working with community organisations, some flexibility should be considered.

In future, consideration might also be given to the limitations arising when pro forma is used in the submission process. Stakeholders were limited to four pages' comment. We were also disappointed that no questions on the pro forma directed the stakeholder to consideration of the wider social and human rights issues associated with drug detection in schools.

The disadvantages of drug detection and screening

Lack of justification for introducing drug detection policies to schools

Following consultation with Victorian community organisations in the AOD and related sectors, VAADA considers that schools should not implement drug detection and screening policies, except in limited circumstances and as a last resort.

Accordingly, VAADA questions the purpose of introducing drug detection and screening policies to schools.

- It is not appropriate to introduce drug detection measures to school as a policing measure, whether randomised or targeted, and whether among students or staff.
 - Without a firm legislative basis, implementing drug detection policies in schools as a policing measure would inevitably expose whoever undertook drug detection to legal action from students, families, teachers and/or schools.
 - There is no reasonable basis for enacting legislation to authorise implementing drug detection policies as a crime detection measure in schools. There is very little research on the effects of school drug testing programs, and none that indicates that drug testing in schools
 - Is necessarily effective in detecting drug use within schools;
 - Deters drug use among students¹;
 - Is of any benefit to students and schools; or
 - Is of any benefit to the wider community.
- It is not appropriate to introduce drug detection measures to schools as an exercise in risk management, except in limited circumstances (described below).
 - There is no evidence that drug use or its effects regularly poses an OHS risk to staff or students in schools. Accordingly, there are no OHS grounds for implementing randomised drug detection measures among students.
 - It is possible that problematic use of alcohol and/or other drugs may affect the competence of school teachers. However, VAADA believes that such issues can be dealt with through regular school disciplinary processes, and do not give grounds for implementing randomised drug detection measures.
- It is not appropriate to introduce drug detection measures to schools for the purposes of student health and well being programs, except in limited circumstances (described below).
 - Randomised drug detection policies would fail to address the health and well being needs of students because
 - They focus on drug use without considering whether drug use is actually detrimental to students' health and well being
 - They are therefore unable to distinguish between experimental drug use, which does not usually harm students' health and well being, and dependent or harmful drug use.
 - They also ignore the fact that alcohol use is more likely to impact on students' health and well being than illicit drug use

The few advantages of introducing drug detection policies to schools

There are very few advantages to introducing drug detection and screening measures to schools. These include

- Schools being able to develop a 'tough on drugs' brand that would be attractive to some parents
 - VAADA does not consider this advantage to schools to be important in the face of the damage drug detection programs can do to students and families.
- Identification of students at risk

¹ Yamaguchi et al, 2004; Kern et al, 2006.

- Schools being able to develop targeted, individualised health and well being or risk management programs that can accurately assess students' drug use, in collaboration with students and where appropriate their families.

Accordingly, VAADA believes that there are only three situations where implementing drug detection policies in schools should be considered:

- Where individual students consent to be tested for drug use, as part of a comprehensive, individualised health and well being plan, because their alcohol and/or drug use has negatively affected their studies. In this circumstance drug testing may allow students and the appropriate school staff to assess students' success in reducing harmful alcohol and/or drug use.
- Where individuals students are engaging in school-sponsored activities that could be risky to students under the influence of alcohol and/or other drugs, such as adventure sports. For purposes of risk management, schools could test students before undertaking these activities. However, in this circumstance schools should always give students prior warning that drug testing will occur in association with these activities. Students who chose not to become involved in activities on notice of drug testing should incur no penalty.
- Where drug dealing and wide-spread problematic drug use are **reliably known to exist** at a school **prior to the implementation of drug detection measures**, and are seriously damaging the education of the majority of students, drug detection measures could be implemented as part of a general strategy to curb drug dealing and wide-spread drug use. This should only occur after adequate consultation with parents, teachers and qualified experts.

In all cases, schools would need to implement detailed policies describing when it is appropriate to test, how to protect students' rights and interests, and how they will provide support to students who test positive for alcohol and/or drug use.

The many disadvantages of introducing drug detection policies to schools

There are many serious disadvantages to introducing drug detection policies to schools. A school's overriding ethical obligation is to provide education to students. Drug detection policies are counter to this obligation in many ways:

- Students who use alcohol and other drugs problematically tend to be among the most vulnerable and socially disconnected of young people. Forcing them to undergo drug detection measures will further alienate them from their schools. Drug detection measures will therefore detach these young people from social supports, and are likely to exacerbate the harms they experience as a consequence of their alcohol/drug use.
- There is a danger that some schools' drug detection policies would consist of testing students, and either expelling them or delivering them to the police if they test positive for drugs. Expelling students would remove them school supports, interfere with their academic progress, and make it difficult for them to access education at a new school. Forcing young people into contact with the criminal justice system can have a whole range of negative effects on their future.
- Drug detection policies – especially randomised screening across the whole school population – foster a culture of suspicion and paranoia among students. This can cause students to distrust teachers and school administration, and disengage from their studies, thereby damaging their educational prospects.
- Drug detection policies also place schools at risk of discriminating against students and violating their human rights.
- Implementation of drug testing policies is expensive to schools. This reduces the resources that can be used in providing education to students.

There are other serious drawbacks to implementing drug detection policies in schools:

- Drug detection policies rely on methods of drug detection that are, to a greater or lesser extent, unreliable. Existing drug testing methods can result in both false negatives and false positives, with unfair consequences to students².
- As drug detection methods are unreliable, they can deliver a false sense of security to schools who wish to create a 'drug-free' environment. In this situation, students who are experiencing drug-related harms but who have not tested positive for drug use will not receive any help with their problems.
- When parents support school drug detection policies, this often promotes distrust between parents and their children³.
- If drug testing does have any deterrent effect, it may simply be that young people transfer their drug use to illicit drugs which are not subject to testing, or to alcohol or pharmaceutical drugs.

Viability of drug detection methods

- **Questionnaires** – VAADA considers that, while questionnaires are non-invasive, they are not particularly reliable in detecting drug use. However, questionnaires could be a useful tool for self-identification of problematic drug use among students, who would on completion be offered follow-up supports including counselling.
- **Interviews and clinical observations** – VAADA considers that interviews are non-invasive, and could be reliable if run by ethical and competent interviewers. However, such interviews should
 - Only be conducted as part of an individualised health and well being plan
 - Be followed up with appropriate supports
 - Have an attached review mechanism
- **Independent tests of body fluids and tissues** – VAADA considers that these methods of drug testing are
 - expensive
 - unreliable – sometimes resulting in false positives and negatives
 - invasive – potentially violating students' rights
 - do not distinguish between experimental and dependent drug use
- **Non-invasive detection mechanisms** – VAADA considers that although these methods are non-invasive, they have all the other disadvantages of fluid and tissue sampling. Further, implementing such measures would do great damage to a school's reputation.

Members consulted by VAADA did not believe that drug detection should be implemented in schools, and so we cannot support any of these methods of drug testing.

If a school discovers drug use among students, it should offer them education, counselling, peer support, access to extracurricular activities, treatment referral if appropriate, school-wide education and healthcare programs and other supports as part of a general health and well being policy.

Alternatives to drug detection policies in schools

Members consulted by VAADA consider that the best alternative to drug detection is drug education. Such drug education should be

- Delivered by properly qualified staff
- Appropriate to a range of developmental levels
- Evidence-based, and focused on the effects of and risks associated with use of specific drugs and polydrug use

² Kern et al, 2006; Australian Drug Foundation, 2004-2007; Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia, 2003.

³ Kern et al, 2006.

- Aimed at reducing the harms associated with problematic alcohol and/or drug use, which may involve reduction of alcohol/drug use or abstinence
- Non-stigmatising

Drug education within schools must be linked to a comprehensive welfare, health and well being strategy that offers students a range of supports to help them deal with problematic alcohol and/or drug use.

School-based education/well being strategies have the advantages of

- Addressing the health needs of students, including reduction of drug-related harms
- Respecting and protecting students' well being
- Keeping students engaged with schools
 - Involvement with education has been identified as a protective factor in reducing drug-related harms
- Involving students in a range of peer and activity networks
 - This has also been identified as a protective factor in reducing drug-related harm

School-based drug education has the disadvantages of

- Not being able to guarantee that students will not misuse drugs
 - However, school drug detection programs cannot guarantee this either, do not have the advantages that well-run education offers, and are associated with a host of unacceptable disadvantages
- Being seen as 'soft on drugs'
 - Consequently, being unattractive to politicians, school boards and parents who wish to gain political traction from being seen as 'tough on drugs'
 - However, schools could work with parents and communities to promote the value of their education/well being programs.

As with drug detection programs, much of the evidence in support of school education/well being strategies is anecdotal. However, VAADA supports the education/well being strategy model for addressing drug use in schools, as

- the evidence base in support of education/well being strategies, although not complete, is stronger than that for drug detection programs
- the risks associated with implementing drug detection programs are much worse
- the benefits associated with implementing education/well being strategies are much stronger
- implementing drug detection programs is likely to be more expensive than implementing education/well being strategies

VAADA notes that the Federal Government has already funded schools to implement drug education, and that on evaluation this program was generally found to have been successful⁴. Additionally, the Victorian Department of Human Services is currently developing a schools drug education policy in collaboration with the Victorian Department of Education⁵. VAADA considers that these initiatives indicate that it is viable for schools to operate drug education/well being strategies.

⁴ Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004.

⁵ Department of Human Services, 2007.

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