



NEW JERSEY TESTS HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES FOR STEROIDS

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In December, New Jersey became the first state in the nation to approve random steroid testing for high school athletes in all sports.

The decision, made by Governor Richard Codey, directs New Jersey high schools to begin random steroid testing in the 2006-7 school year.

Codey, who is also a youth basketball coach, created a task force on steroid use and prevention in July in response to national statistics showing increased steroid use among high school students.

“This is a growing public health threat, one we can’t leave up to individual parents, coaches or schools to handle,” he said at a news conference.

Steroid use on the rise

The number of high school students who admitted taking steroids has almost doubled in five years: 6.1 percent in 2003 up from 3.1 percent in 1998, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Peter King, a member of the task force and a senior staff writer at Sports Illustrated, interviewed 28 coaches, athletes and school administrators to determine how widespread steroid use was in New Jersey schools.

"While steroids are definitely in use in New Jersey high school sports -- mostly in football ... the use of steroids is not widespread at all levels of sport," he concluded. "Use is more prevalent at the schools where athletes have a better chance of using sports to get college scholarships."

The task force also reported that the use of steroids and supplements is greatest in large, suburban schools where there is more pressure to make varsity teams, more students who can afford to buy steroids, and more private training opportunities like health clubs where steroids are available.

New Jersey outlines a testing plan

New Jersey plans to limit testing to a selection of student athletes who qualify for post-season play.

Of the nearly 230,000 students who participate in 31 different high school sports in New Jersey, about 10,000 take part in championship games.

Under the governor’s plan, 500 -- or 5 percent -- of those students will be tested.

Students caught using steroids will likely be suspended from sports activities in addition to whatever penalty might be imposed by their school.

Responses to the plan

Overall, response to the governor's plan has been positive.

Students want cheaters to be caught and coaches want a level playing field.

"If you ask our players, all they would want is that the players across from them be under the same rules as we are. We don't want to play against men when we're boys," an unnamed student told the task force.

Editorials in newspapers across the state have generally supported the plan, although it is not without its critics, including those concerned about cost.

Initial estimates from the governor's office put the cost at \$50,000 for the first year.

Other critics point to privacy concerns. Deborah Jacobs, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, said although she does not plan to challenge the plan in court, she considers it an invasion of privacy for students and their families.

"This really undercuts the rights and roles of the parent and interferes with family privacy," Jacobs told the New York Times. "It should be up to a family to decide what kind of exams a student should be subjected to."

The Supreme Court has twice ruled that drug testing of students is constitutional.

Health risks of steroids

Anabolic steroids stimulate muscle tissue to grow by mimicking the effects of the hormone testosterone.

Teens who take steroids and weight train "bulk up" more quickly. Teens who use steroids may look and feel stronger, but only at great risk to their health.

The adverse side effects from steroid use include the potential to stunt growth, cause irreversible liver damage, enlarge the heart muscles and cause violent mood swings.

In boys, steroids can reduce the size of the testicles, decrease sperm production and cause breasts to grow. In girls, steroids may disrupt the menstrual cycle and cause fertility problems.

The governor's plan calls for steroid awareness and education programs for student, coaches and teachers in both middle and high school.

--By Anne Bell for NewsHour Extra
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