

# IT TOOK A CRISIS TO CREATE A CHANGE

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In 1998, De La Salle, a Catholic school in New Orleans, was rumored to have a drug problem. Some in the city had nicknamed the school “De La Drugs,” and the problem was eroding the quality of education and threatening young lives. Fortunately, the school had a Head Mistress and Principal named Yvonne Gelpi who had the courage, wisdom and will to deal with the problem head on.



With the assistance of her administration, Ms Gelpi proposed a hair testing program with a company named Psychemedics. Hair has a 90 day window of detection and it is difficult, if not impossible, to cheat the test. She initially met with the faculty, informing them that if students were to be tested it was only fair that faculty and administration be tested as well. Next she met with parents in an open forum, expecting 50 parents, and surprised when 250 showed up. After the session, she got a standing ovation from the parents.

Next, she held student assemblies and informed them of the hair testing policy, which would be implemented when they returned to school in the fall after summer vacation. If they were using drugs, they had fair warning to stop. No harm, no foul.

On the first round of tests, out of a student body of 700 students, 33 kids tested positive. The parents were brought in with the student and informed of the result. There was no penalty enforced by the school, only a reminder that if a second positive occurred any time during their school tenure, they would be asked to leave the school. Counseling was suggested as an option but at the parent’s direction. The second round three months later only produced 3 positives. Today, almost 15 years later, the program still exists, but the drug problem is gone.

Says Ms Gelpi, “...Drug testing changed the school environment overnight. We had a 60% reduction in detentions for fighting; 82% reduction in detentions for disruptive behavior; and drug dealers no longer hung around the outskirts of the campus. The intent was to be as non-punitive as possible; to get drugs out of the school, not the kids.” Ms Gelpi not only enhanced the education at De La Salle, she saved a lot of young lives, not only at her school, but in many others that followed suit.

Private schools have an advantage when it comes to drug testing, as they can make it a criteria for admission. But public schools do not have to be deprived. A 2002 Supreme Court decision (Board of Education vs Earls, No.01-332) allowed random drug testing for sports and extra curricular activities, and *suspicion based testing* is legal for all students, and highly recommended.

The reason most students experiment with drugs is due to peer pressure. A voluntary program for parents and kids who sign up, backed with suspicion-based testing at school, eliminates this pressure and gives them an excuse not to experiment. Research has shown the biggest reason kids do not use drugs is fear their parents will find out. The accuracy and 90 day window of detection for hair testing has proven to be the best deterrent to keep kids off drugs, and for early identification of kids who have a problem so they can get help.

If schools establish a policy that they will *hair test any child that shows cause for concern* they could experience the same overnight result as De La Salle. Test results can be confidential between the schools and parents, with the consequences for the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and subsequent positive tests well defined so that kids learn to be accountable for their own actions. Parents pay \$59 per test, so little or no financial burden for the school. Testing once during a school year on a random basis is normally sufficient to deter drug use.

Academic achievement and discipline aside, teens are 6 times more susceptible to addiction than adults. Screening will improve the school environment while saving many young people from addiction.