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Hall County may drug test students who drive to school

Program could begin this fall

The Hall County Board of Education is looking at expanding mandatory, random drug testing to include students who drive to school as early as the fall. Superintendent Will Schofield recommended the measure Monday night.

"We don't have a greater safety issue than people under the influence driving vehicles," he said in an interview earlier in the day.

The program now involves only student athletes, with costs covered by gate receipts as part of athletic budgets. The expanded move could be covered by student parking fees now in place.

Schofield said the district would set up a public meeting on the change.

"After the meeting, we would adopt the policy and procedures," he added.

Last year, school officials began exploring the change, possibly to also affect middle and high school students in extracurricular programs.

"Those would be next steps," Schofield said. "One of the challenges is you can't use your general fund money to test (for drugs)."

At least one student, 16-year-old Michael Mullins of North Hall High School, agrees with the plans.

"I think it would be a good idea," he said. "Personally, I don't want somebody who is on drugs hurting somebody else the time they are on the road."

Mullins, a junior who has been driving to school since the fall, added that he doesn't think the policy should necessarily be expanded to cover students in other extracurricular programs.

"I don't think people in, like, band and chorus are as likely to test positive for drugs," said Mullins, a band member.

Under the current policy, an athlete who tests positive for the first time will be banned for 10 percent of the team's scheduled games for the season, excluding practice scrimmages.

With a second offense, the student will be suspended from the team but can apply for reinstatement after at least four weeks if the student can provide a negative drug screen to school administrators, agree to continue with drug counseling and be subjected to future testing on demand. The principal, head coach and athletic director will decide on reinstatement.

A third positive screen will result in suspension from all interscholastic athletic competition for one calendar year from the date of the result.

Gordon Higgins, the district's director for community relations and athletics, said student drivers and athletes would form a single testing pool.

Northeast Georgia Toxicology, which conducts the district's drug testing, "has said it would be no problem for them to take on this additional duty," Higgins said.

Schofield also noted that "surface testing" technology "is sensitive enough to swab a steering wheel and ... read residues. And so we will also look at incorporating the testing of steering wheels, door handles, book bags, etc."

Board member Nath Morris said he hopes students see the policy "as a deterrent, not a punishment."

"We're not out there looking to catch kids doing things wrong," Morris said. "We're trying to help them make the right decision."

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- Other business
- In other action Monday night, the Hall County Board of Education:
 - Heard from Superintendent Will Schofield that North Hall High School had withdrawn a request to install artificial turf on the school's football field.
 - Approved guidelines allowing students to transfer next school year to Johnson High School to participate in the International Baccalaureate program from the schools that won't offer it — Flowery Branch High, East Hall High and Chestatee High.
 - Heard from officials at Center Point, a Christian-based agency that offers mentoring and other services, on a request for \$40,000 in continued funding next school year for its student mentoring program.
 - Approved a revision in the school system's application to the state Department of Education for its World Languages Academy, which is set to open in the fall, to become a charter school. District officials said the state Board of Education could consider the application in May.