

More students likely to be tested for drugs

BY JOHN L. GUERRA, Citizen Staff

The School Board is proceeding with plans to expand drug testing to include nonathletes who take part in band and other extracurricular activities.

The board next month will request bids for next year's drug testing, but board members first must decide which students to test.

"From four to six students" failed drug tests this year in Monroe County schools, said Pedro Fraga, the district's executive director of business and fiscal services. Fraga and Transportation Director Dori Collins run the drug tests in the school system.

Board member Duncan Mathewson wondered whether students ever learn of impending drug tests and stay away from school to avoid testing.

"They [students] have no way of knowing," Fraga said.

Athletic directors at each school are given 24 hours' notice, but they don't learn which students are to be tested until the day of the test, he said. FirstLab, the Pennsylvania company that tests the urine for the presence of drugs, randomly picks the names from a list of athletes provided by each athletic director at the beginning of the year and again in the spring session.

The board heard from a representative of a Miami-Dade health facility that tests students from 17 elementary, middle and high schools. The facility spends \$33 per student for testing and can test for 12 kinds of drugs, including barbiturates, cocaine, marijuana and other street drugs, the representative said.

According to Collins, who described the drug-testing process for The Citizen last month, the district spends about \$36 per student. In the spring, the district tested 201 students from Coral Shores, 73 from Marathon and 167 from Key West high schools. She sent the list of student names to FirstLab, which then randomly picked the names of 25 percent of the students from each list and sent the list of names to be tested back to Collins.

Collins then called the athletic directors of each high school and immediately faxed the list of students to be tested. Within hours, a Keys firm collected urine samples from students and sent the samples to FirstLab. The lab tested the samples, then posted the results online, where Collins and Fraga accessed them using a password-protected site.

Board member Debra Walker told fellow board members Tuesday that she wants to make sure drug testing is not just an exercise in "social engineering" — that there's a real need to test before expanding testing to other activities.

The board also heard from Fraga on efforts to turn Sigsbee Elementary into a charter school, which the district is closing to save money. Students at Sigsbee will be transferred to Glynn Archer Elementary School after the 2008-2009 school year.

The commanders of the three Navy installations in Key West have formed a "founding fathers" committee through which the Navy can apply for charter status for Sigsbee. Once that board hires a liaison for the charter school, they'll decide whether to launch one by themselves or whether they'll convert it with the help of the district.

Board member John Dick asked whether the chartering process might erase any savings the district might realize from closing Sigsbee.

"The original purpose of saving finances is lost; in the end I don't see any savings," he said.

Schools Superintendent Randy Acevedo pointed out there might be some small costs if the district is involved in the Sigsbee conversion, but the district will save money by not running Sigsbee after 2009.

In other business, Fred Sims, the district's executive director of facilities and construction, told the board that two companies had provided prices for finding hazardous materials on the Old Harris School property. The district is required to find and remove mercury, lead, asbestos and other unsafe materials before tearing down the old cafeteria and classrooms on the site of the historic school.

Charley Toppino and Sons Construction Co. offered to do the demolition work for around \$60,000, and EE&G offered to do the hazardous materials work for about \$7,700. The board approved the contracts Tuesday night.

jguerra@keysnews.com