

High school wastewater testing results released to the public

Written by Molly Ann Howell Managing Editor
Friday, 08 March 2024 00:00



SUPERINTENDENT NOT SURPRISED BY DRUGS IN COMMUNITY

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham declared substance misuse a public health emergency in September. In response, the New Mexico Department of Health issued a public health order. As a part of that public health order, the NMDOH decided to do wastewater testing for drugs at public high schools, and the results are now available to the public.

The New Mexico Environment Department oversaw the testing. In an interview with the *Sun*, Jonas Armstrong, the director of NMED's Office of Strategic Initiatives, said that testing at Gallup-McKinley County Schools high schools was completed on Dec. 12, 13, 14, and 19.

WHAT THE RESULTS MEAN

Results were broken up into two categories: opioids (and their metabolites) and stimulants (and their metabolites). Metabolites are the chemical compounds that drugs break down into after they are consumed. The human body metabolizes some of the drugs included in this effort very quickly, making them difficult to detect in wastewater unless they are flushed directly or consumed within a short period of time. Measuring both drugs and their metabolites provides additional evidence as to whether a drug has been consumed.

According to a press release published by the governor's office on Dec. 13, wastewater testing is a science-based, proven method of gathering baselines and spotting trends in data around a variety of public health issues. Testing wastewater at schools for illicit drugs provides a clear snapshot of drug use in a campus population on the date that samples were taken.

Results do not indicate how many individuals used drugs, the quantity of drugs consumed, where drugs were consumed (i.e. on or off school property), or whether the drugs were used by students, staff, or visitors. Schools where drugs were not detected could still have drug use

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within the campus community that were consumed on another day when testing did not occur.

“The Wastewater Testing Dashboard sheds light on a complex challenge facing our schools. Of particular note was the pervasive presence of cocaine in the sampling. That’s one area where we can improve communications with students right now as parents, school leaders and public health experts,” Health Secretary Patrick Allen said. “On the other hand, it’s clear that prevention efforts work: heroin was not detected in any of the schools so far. These results emphasize the importance of proactive measures, open communication with parents, and a united effort to safeguard our students.”

Environment Secretary James Kenney explained how this data can help the state stop illicit drug use.

“While these results show widespread use of illicit drugs in our high schools, they also provide us with a vital baseline to measure progress in addressing this issue,” he said. “As we continue to receive results from public schools around the state, we will better understand the geographic differences in substance misuse within communities and develop strategies accordingly.”

WHAT WAS FOUND AT GMCS

Traces of methamphetamine were found in the wastewater systems at Gallup High, Miyamura High, and Thoreau High. Traces of cocaine were found at Gallup High, Miyamura High, and Ramah High. Benzoylcegonine, which is a metabolite that is only created when someone uses cocaine, was found in the sewer systems of Gallup High, Miyamura High, and Ramah High. Traces of amphetamines were found at Ramah High.

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As for opioids, both hydromorphone and hydrocodone were found at Crownpoint High and Ramah High.

No drugs were detected at Tohatchi High School on the day of testing.

At the Feb. 26 GMCS school board meeting, Superintendent Mike Hyatt addressed the testing's findings, saying that the findings don't necessarily reflect a drug problem in the district's schools, but rather in the local community as a whole. He also pointed out some possible flaws in the testing.

"I don't think it's surprising that there are people who might have drugs in their systems in our communities, but you can't really narrow it down to where it came from [with this testing]," Hyatt said.

He argued that with basketball season going on in December, many different people visited the school campuses around the time of the testing.

"It could be one person who took the drug over the weekend and went to the bathroom [at one of the GMCS schools]. It could be an adult at a game. You can't narrow this down. It's not like this was just students," Hyatt said.

Hyatt also denounced the testing method.

"They tried to tell me that the wastewater all clears out all the time and I asked them if they had ever opened up a sewer and seen that wastewater doesn't always necessarily replace itself..." Hyatt said.

Overall, Hyatt said he was not surprised by the test results. He noted that the district does frequent anonymous surveys asking the students about their drug use. Ultimately, he suggested that the state decided to do this testing now because they're trying to get federal funding for

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drug treatment in the state.

HOW MUCH DID THIS COST?

State funding for the testing totaled \$758 million. Armstrong said each sample cost about \$2,000 to \$3,000 depending on the school.

He said no further testing is planned for GMCS, partly because the funds have been depleted. However, he explained that NMED did find the testing useful in general.

“The wastewater testing is helpful to inform strategies at every level of government going forward. Our schools are microcosms of the communities that they are in, so it’s key to bring stakeholders together in implementing effective strategies and just knowing now that we’re getting the data, that’s the start of this process and not the end of it,” he said.

NMED Communications Director Matt Maez agreed with Armstrong, calling the data tangible.

“A lot of school leaders in New Mexico state that they already knew that there’s a drug problem in their schools, but I do think this project is bringing a science-based approach and providing us with tangible data that can be used to look at what’s working and what needs to be tweaked, and identify other potential ways of addressing this,” he said.

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