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Alcohol testing on rise at high school events

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(AP) -- It was getting so few teachers at Westwood High School in suburban Boston wanted to chaperone school dances. There were drunken quarrels and dramas. At one school event, a student was rushed to the hospital with alcohol poisoning.

"It's a drag to deal with it," one teacher told assistant principal Emily Parks. And that's how she and other school administrators were feeling, too. "It's frankly kind of frightening when you have students who've had enough to drink that it's presenting a safety problem," Parks says.

So, in recent weeks, she and fellow administrators adopted a policy that a growing number of schools are using to deter drinking at after-hours events: They're now testing students who enter school dances, including the upcoming prom, with Breathalyzers.

Some teens complain that the testing policies are intrusive and misdirected. They include 18-year-old Jason Speakman, who thinks officials' efforts would be more effective if they tested students as they left events to drive home, or increased road patrols.

"Kids getting into cars stumbling drunk -- THAT'S a problem," says Speakman, a high school senior in Barrington, Rhode Island, where school officials are considering alcohol tests.

If he were asked to take a test when entering a school event, he says he would refuse -- even if he'd had no



North Central High School Principal C.E. Quandt poses with the school's Alcohawk tester in Indianapolis.

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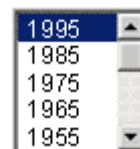
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alcohol. "I just feel like it's a violation of privacy," he says.

In an attempt to be less disruptive, officials at some schools only use alcohol testing on students they suspect have been drinking -- ones who might have slurred speech or are chewing a lot of gum to hide the odor.

"Without a Breathalyzer ... you have to be lucky or the kid has to be stupid," says Rich Catrambone, a social worker at Newton South High School in Newton, Massachusetts, where testing is done on a case-by-case basis. "This takes the guess work out of it."

Last fall, officials at the school expanded testing to a night football game -- a move that caught many students off guard and resulted in nine getting suspended.

That outcome prompted student newspaper editor Chiraag Mundhe to write an editorial suggesting that giving students advance warning would do more to deter underage drinking.

"It really didn't curb the problem; it just punished kids," says Mundhe, a 17-year-old senior.

He's more supportive of the type of policy adopted at nearby Westwood High, where every student entering dances must take a Breathalyzer test.

'There is a right and wrong'

At North Central High School in Indianapolis, an early adopter of alcohol testing, that's been the rule for 10 years. And Principal C.E. Quandt has never had a student test positive -- proof, he says, that students are getting the point.

"You can't protect kids 24-7, but you can make the experience they have here a positive one," Quandt says. "We're not going to 'wink-wink' the issue. There is a right and wrong."

Now some parents are following suit.

Worried about a spate of drunk driving accidents, Steve Sherrets, a father in Independence, Iowa, purchased his own tester, a brand known as Alcohawk, to monitor his two teenage sons.

"At first, they said 'You can believe us,'" Sherrets says of his sons' reaction. "And I said, 'Well, I'm sure that's what the kids told their parents before they got into accidents, too.'"

Still, testing for alcohol isn't a cure-all.

"Anyone who thinks Breathalyzers are going to solve the problem is kidding themselves," says Stephen Wallace, national chairman and CEO of Students Against Destructive Decisions, also known as SADD. "It can be somewhat effective, but it's only one tool in the toolbox."

He says schools also should provide counseling and education about underage drinking and encourage parent-child communication on the issue.

Wallace noted, too, that some teens he's spoken with in focus groups said they would

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simply take substances that couldn't be detected by a Breathalyzer -- or would avoid school events where testing was done.

Laura Maloney, a 15-year-old freshman at Westwood High in Massachusetts, says many students did, indeed, skip a recent dance where testing was done for the first time. But while she has mixed feelings about the new policy, she says many friends who attended told her that being tested "wasn't a big deal."

"When that goes out," she says, "maybe people won't be as skeptical."

Her mother, Leslie Warner-Maloney -- who is president of the school's parent-teacher organization -- hopes so.

She says underage drinking has been a big concern to parents, many of whom gathered to watch a video about a freshman at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who died in 1997 after binge drinking at a fraternity.

"That really just hit us," Warner-Maloney says. "My kids are straight-A students -- and so was this kid. It could happen to anyone."

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