A second look at First Night 1C

Trojans' Wilke gets 1,000th point 1B

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# 1 in 3 students agree to drug tests

By Sharon Schiff

JAMES CITY — We now have a head count for voluntary drug testing. One out of every three students in WJC middle and high schools has agreed to be randomly screened in the watered-down program.

Of more than 5,600 middle and high school students, about 1,900 agreed to enter the testing pool. However, fewer than 300 will actually be tested by the end of the school year, equal to 15% of the willing population. They will be scrutinized for marijuana, alcohol, amphetamines and prescription drugs.

Participation was greater at the middle school level, where parents are deeply concerned about nipping drug use early. Nearly half of those who returned forms agreed to be tested. About one in four high school students were willing to submit to drug tests.

Last school year, a groundswell of parents encouraged Superintendent Gary Mathews to propose a random drug screening policy for two sectors. At the eleventh hour, the School Board reverted to a voluntary policy as a compromise.

Fully 1,885 WJC students have enrolled in the voluntary policy in its first year. Forms were sent home on the first day of school, but the sealed envelopes were only opened just before winter break.

Steve Chantry, director of Student Services, was pleased to see such a high rate of participation. "I think once it's in place, people will see how carefully this has been monitored," he said. He expects the number to rise eventually.

The tougher proposal targeted athletes and students enrolled in extracurricular activities. The voluntary version is open to any student.

The voluntary program was slowed after Bacon Street, which provides drug counseling, submitted the low bid for the testing contract. Alarmed about a potential conflict of interest, the School Board withdrew the contract and re-wrote it to exclude Bacon Street.

That forced a delay in the drug testing until this spring. Kroll Labs Inc. of Louisiana won the contract, and Chantry said testing will likely begin as early as next week.

"I am just so pleased to see it starting up," he said.

A formula has been devised to test 15% of those enrolled in the policy each school year, which will compress testing into one semester this year.

The cost for each test is per student is $38. Kroll will randomly select the students and notify the principal so the student can be excused from class to be screened. Testing will be done about twice a month, but the dates will be kept confidential.

Kroll Inc. has contracted Riverside Business Health Services to take a lab technician and medical review officer into the schools. They will notify parents of the results.

If a student tests positive, he or she and the parents will be notified within 4 days. Because the program is designed to be non-punitive, the only information reported to the division will be statistical. School officials won't know which students, if any, tested positive. □