Idea of drug-testing high school athletes receives mixed reactions in Baton Rouge

As far as testing the kids, I do not believe that is the responsibility of the school system," Purvis said. "That's a medical problem, and certainly parents are more responsible.

After all, Purvis said, the drug of choice for students is alcohol, which is not tested for.

"Our biggest problem in Baton Rouge, La., and I believe it would be true across the country, is alcohol. If you have 8 percent of the kids using marijuana, that means you have 92 percent of the kids not using."

The Supreme Court case involves a school district in Vernon, Ore., that began randomly testing students for drug use in 1989. The testing was done to combat discipline problems that school system officials suspected were caused by drugs.

Students who refused testing or failed the drug test were denied participation in school activities. Legal concerns caused the system to later revise its drug testing policy to apply only to student athletes.

The student athletes comprise about 70 percent of students. The parents of student James Acton objected to testing, saying it

is an unreasonable search and violates their son's 4th Amendment rights.

The American Civil Liberties Union brought suit on the Acton's behalf. The Supreme Court decided to hear the case last November. A decision is expected by the end of June.

Donald Fleet, East Baton Rouge assistant superintendent for executive services and formerly acting superintendent, said the school district has no business testing for drug use.

"We don't mandate something of that nature," Fleet said. "We have no policy in effect to cover that."

The state has no policy to test for drugs in schools, either, said Raymond Arveson, state superintendent of education.

"If drug testing of students is going to be done, I think there should be something that makes it legal and provides for the conditions under which drug testing is done. I think all the legalities would have to be explored before any school system would go into it."

Winfred Sible, legislative consultant to the Louisiana School Boards Association, said he is unaware of any push for legislation to allow student drug testing in Louisiana.

"I don't think there'd be a problem to do it, legislatively-wise," Sible said. "I think we'd have a problem with the judiciary. The judiciary has been reluctant to allow just general testing of everybody without a reason or a cause, the same as search and seizure."

Parents and educators interviewed acknowledged constitutional concerns with testing students for drug use. They also said they know drug use among teen-agers is a big problem.

"My hope would be that we could randomly test for drugs with anyone," said Tara High School Principal David Corona. "The situation with drug abuse in our country has reached epidemic proportions, and something drastic has to be done."

Any decision to test students should be done on a school-by-school basis, said Baton Rouge High Magnet Principal Lois A. Sumrall.

"If a school has a severe drug problem and truly has just cause to believe that the majority of its athletes may be into drugs, then I could see where they would want to test the students."

"But in a school where there is not a big drug problem, little or no drugs, I could see that it (the testing) would be a severe problem. ... It could perhaps do more harm than good."

Corona expressed concern about the expanding role of schools.

"We're serving breakfast as well as lunch. We have extended daycare facilities. We're being mandated to act as parents in a lot of instances."

With that in mind, Corona said, why not add drug testing to the growing list of school duties.