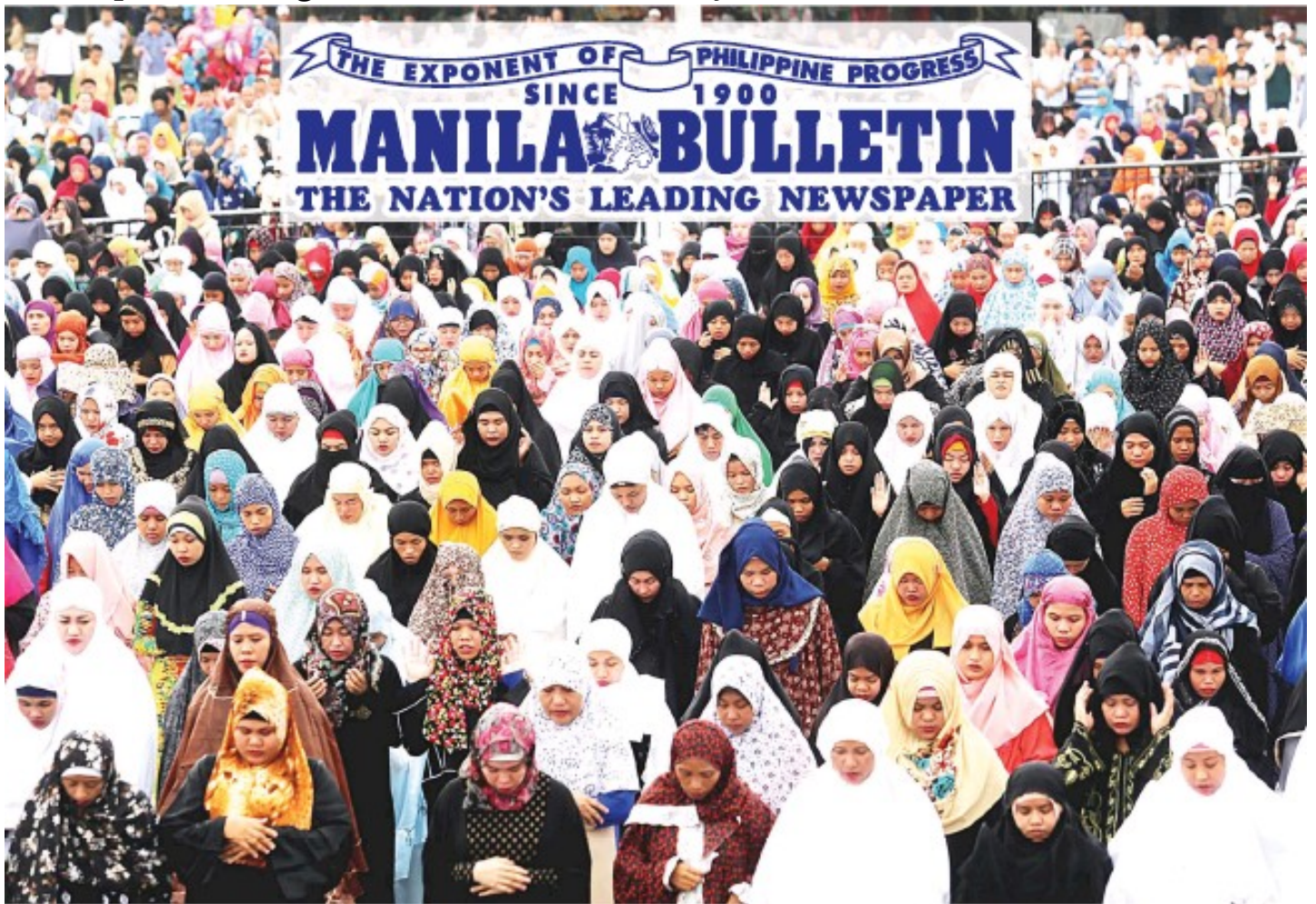


# Mandatory drug tests in QC

Public high school and college students covered even without parental consent

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All public high school and college students in Quezon City (QC) will be subjected to mandatory drug tests. Vice Mayor Joy Belmonte announced this Friday while revealing a Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) report stating that there is a “100 percent drug affectation in Quezon City” in all school levels.



In the event parents refuse to allow their children to undergo drug test, Belmonte said the students will still have to go through the process since it is mandatory. While PDEA confirmed that even some elementary pupils are already drug users, Belmonte said the city government will initially focus on older students. She bared that at the beginning of the school year, parents must sign a paper while the children will be oriented about the drug testing process.

“Magkakaroon po tayo ng orientation, information dissemination campaign, may papel kailangan nilang pirmahan (There will be an orientation, information dissemination campaign, they need to sign some papers),” Belmonte said. She, however, did not explain what the document that parents need to sign is all about. She added that they will also explain to the parents the confidentiality and privacy of the drug testing process to allay fears that the tests will traumatize the children. Belmonte said the city government will meet with the selection boards that will be formed in each school to come up with guidelines, based on recommendations of school authorities, to protect the confidentiality of students who undergo testing. In cases where parental consent is declined, Belmonte said the parents will still have to undergo counselling to explain why the mandatory drug testing is necessary.

She said that the drug testing process is already mandated under Republic Act 9165 or the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002.

To carry out the mandatory drug testing, the selection boards composed of the school principal, student council president, head of faculty department, and head of Parents-Teachers' Association will be required to come up with a list of students who they believe must be tested.

Belmonte said urine samples will be used by Department of Health (DOH) clinics for the drug tests.

Students tested positive for illegal drugs, she said, will be subjected to a case interview with their parents, guidance counselors, school authorities, and a representative from the DOH to determine their level of drug dependency.

In the case interview, Belmonte said the student will be asked how he started using drugs and who the sources in the community are, details that are very important in unearthing the root cause of his illegal substance use.

Recreational users will undergo school-based counseling but repeat offenders may be put in a drug rehabilitation facility.

Under RA 9165, private schools must also have random drug tests. But Quezon City's ordinance and the Department of Education's (DepEd's) memorandum circular only specify mandatory drug testing in public schools.

Education Secretary Leonor Briones had earlier said random drug testing in schools will resume, assuring that the results will not be a basis for the students to be expelled or faculty member to be fired.

She also assured that the drug testing will be preventive and not punitive. She said she is set to meet with police officials regarding the proposal of random inspection of bags and lockers in schools to complement the drug testing.

Chief Superintendent Guillermo Eleazar, National Capital Regional Police Office director, had proposed the random inspections of students' bags and lockers in

schools, drawing flak from lawmakers and the clergy.

ACT Teachers party-list lawmakers described the proposal as an attack to students' right to privacy and an impending "tokhang" in schools.

"With such proposal, the government will be asking too much from the already overworked and underpaid public school teachers who will carry out the burden of the operations, adding to the long list of clerical work they are doing on top of their already heavy teaching loads," ACT Teachers Reps. Antonio Tinio said in a statement.

He also branded as "intrusive" the proposed inspection, reminding that classrooms are not detention cells.

"Students are not prisoners, their classrooms are not prison cells, their teachers not jailers. They can't be subjected to random and intrusive searches like the authorities do to convicts in Bilibid," Tinio added.

He expressed apprehension that with our public schools' lack of professional guidance counselors for proper briefing and debriefing, students will be left vulnerable to trauma.

ACT Teachers Rep. France Castro said the PNP should instead run after big-time drug syndicates and protectors.

Nueva Ecija Bishop Roberto Mallari, head of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education, would rather that students be educated on the problem of illegal drugs and its negative effects.

"I think that we should even give our students more information about this problem so that they become part in the effort to eradicate this," added the prelate. He believes being proactive will help solve the drug problem.

"After seeing the vast problem of drugs in the country, we have to be more proactive in solving this problem," Mallari added. (With reports from Charissa L. Atienza and Leslie G. Aquino)