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The Evening Star

DOE outlines its mental health plan for children

Agency doesn't seek mandatory mental screens

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The Children's Social, Emotional and Behavioral Health Plan is a product of the Indiana Department of Education, as legislated by Senate Enrolled Act 529 in 2005.



Kristen Schunk, assistant director of the IDOE Division of Exceptional Learners, chaired the task force

that, over 11 months, created the 70-page document, including appendixes that include recommendations and comments from a number of sources.

Her committee made the document public on June 1 and updated it in August. It is now in the review process. According to Rep. Jackie Walorski, R-Lakeville, a preliminary discussion on it is scheduled on the House floor Wednesday with the Indiana Commission on Mental Health. The meeting is open to the public, and Walorski said she anticipates "a crowd."

While the document itself does not suggest universal mental health testing for Indiana children, SEA 529 does mandate it, in Chapter 5, Section 2, No. 5, with this wording: "The children's social, emotional and behavioral health plan shall recommend ... (5) that social, emotional and mental health screening be included as a part of routine examinations in schools and by health care providers."

It is this language that has enraged a growing number of Indiana parents and incited some Indiana legislators, including Walorski, state Rep. Marlin Stutzman, R-Howe, and state Rep. Matt Bell, R-Avilla, to call for the repeal of SEA 529 in its entirety.

The most vocal opponents allege that, without changing the language, the law could open the door for some schools and health care providers to decide they have to administer mental health testing to all children,

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whether the DOE's plan calls for it or not. They also fear that the law's language legally circumvents parental permission, even though the task force emphasizes in the plan that parental involvement is a must.

Opponents' ultimate fear is that, as a result of the testing, mandatory or not, many children may be diagnosed mistakenly with mental illnesses, which could lead to parents being pressured — or forced — to drug their children with anti-depressants, psychotropics or stimulants intended to control attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, such as Ritalin.

"I talked with Bob Behning (a House co-sponsor of the law)," Walorski said. "And he said, 'Who said testing without parental permission is ever going to happen again?' (see "Lawsuit claims unauthorized testing.")

"But I said it never should have happened at all. Besides, just based on information from other states with this already in place, like Florida, which had to go back and make a special law to protect parents who had refused their permission, I think it's better to take care of this now."

DOE speaks

However, Schunk and Bob Marra, associate superintendent of the Division of Exceptional Learners, insist that the DOE intentionally did not include mandatory, universal mental health testing in the plan. Not only that, the task force made the decision not to include it in spite of a show of support for it at public forums on the plan.

Parents and legislators who believe otherwise simply are blowing the law's intent out of proportion, Schunk and Marra said.

"We had as many people for universal testing as against it," Marra said. "Some people who talked to us would love to see universal screening with vision and hearing. But we don't want that to happen — the team wasn't for it; none of us wanted it, actually."

What the team did was focus on assessment of at-risk, Indiana children already identified as in need of some kind of mental health services, Schunk said. "But it's been reported differently. Screening is a very small part of this, but it is this piece that's getting all the attention nationwide."

TeenScreen is one instrument that could be used for assessing at-risk children. Those identified as at-risk possibly could include Children in Need of Services, those in the juvenile justice system, a child already identified as having physical or mental disabilities, foster children or certain children receiving services under the Family and Social Services Administration, for example.

Schunk and Marra pointed out that the DOE's plan does not recommend any particular program or mention TeenScreen at all. However, TeenScreen is mentioned in one of the appendixes, based on public comment.

And, again, Schunk and Marra reiterated that, no matter what test would be used to screen a child, absolutely no screening would be done without active, written, consent and participation of the parents.

"Without parental consent, nothing can go forward," Marra said. "You won't get the needed results without parents' participation, which is crucial."

(For more on this story, go to at www.fwdailynews.com)

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