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The News-Sun

## DOE task force presents children's mental health plan

*Mother from Indiana alleges conflict of interest*

By Cindy Bevington

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Nearly two years after the Indiana General Assembly mandated it, the Children's Social, Emotional and Behavioral Health Plan is now awaiting review and approval by state mental health officials.



Rhodes

The plan makes recommendations on how the state can provide

comprehensive, coordinated mental health care and treatment to all Indiana children from birth through age 22.

A Department of Education task force presented the plan Wednesday to the Indiana Commission on Mental Health.

While a June version of the document included references to TeenScreen, a controversial mental health screening instrument used in hundreds of schools in at least 43 states, the latest version did not.

The plan also did not recommend automatic mental health screening for all Indiana children, even though Senate Enrolled Act 529, which the General Assembly passed with only one dissenting vote in 2005,

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mandates it.

The presentation went well, according to the task force's chair, Kristen Schunk, who said Friday that the plan's fate is now up to the commission. Schunk is the assistant director of the IDOE Division of Exceptional Learners.

Bob Marra, associate superintendent of the division and member of the task force, made the formal presentation. Representatives from a variety of public agencies, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness, attended the presentation.

Conflict of interest?

Teresa Rhoades, mother of a Mishawaka high school teen who allegedly was given a TeenScreen test in 2004 without Rhoades' permission, also was present.

Rhoades and her husband, Michael, are suing their daughter's school and school board because of the incident. Wednesday, Teresa Rhoades related some of her family's experiences with the test and pointed out what she believes are conflicts of interest among the task force's and commission's membership rosters.

For example, one commission member works for Madison Center, which administers the TeenScreen test in her school district, Rhoades said.

Someone else, Robert Postlethwait, not only sat on the task force as a parent representative, but also on the commission, effectively helping to create a document that he also would be reviewing.

Postlethwait, who served on the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, also is a member of the TeenScreen advisory board, and is listed as such on the program's Web site.

"But I didn't have my paper proof with me," Rhoades said. "So I didn't bring that up, since I wanted to be able to show it to them when I did. But I did talk about several other members that had other interests that I think are conflicts."

Contacted Friday, Schunk said she didn't know Postlethwait - who has now resigned from both the task force and the commission - had any ties to TeenScreen. Last week Schunk and Marra both denied any connection between the plan and TeenScreen, saying that the test was mentioned in the June draft only as part of public comment.

TeenScreen wasn't mentioned, either, in a list of agencies from whom the task force sought advice and information in writing the plan presented Wednesday.

"(Postlethwait) resigned after we finished the plan," Schunk said Friday. "We didn't know he was on the TeenScreen board. We had people on it from all different areas. But even so, TeenScreen wasn't something we advocated."

Commission chairman Rep. Cindy Noe, R-Indianapolis, said she had heard that references to TeenScreen had been taken out of Wednesday's document.

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She also not only knew that Postlethwait "had a pretty strong connection to TeenScreen, and was very much in favor of it, but also that he had worked for Eli Lilly for nearly 30 years, and that he had a "focus and knowledge of psychotropic drugs."

#### Raising concern

Wednesday, Noe questioned how the state will conduct mental health screening and carry out all the plans outlined in the new health plan and stay compliant with the HIPAA law, a federal medical privacy act.

Thursday she said that since she had taken on the Mental Health Commission's chairmanship, she had been shocked by everything she's learning about how the state's mental health system works.

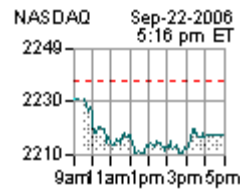
SEA 529 was an honest attempt to help fix some of the problems, she said. She also said she was re-thinking her vote on SEA 529.

"Yes, I voted for it," Noe said. "But now, well, to me there is a philosophical question as to what is the role of government with children? Do we just have these kids, pop them out and then turn them over to the government?"

"I know this system's broken, and I have no doubt that it is very difficult to navigate.

I do believe that there are things in SEA 529 with promise to help with this, but at this point in time, unless certain things are changed, the only thing standing between the government having control over our children and this plan being carried out is parental permission.

"One problem, though, is the make up of this commission - 13 members are intimately involved in mental health, and they think this plan is necessary. And when I ask for a vote, are they going to vote to reign in their own profession?"



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