



The Fresno Bee
Suicide-risk screening effort blasted
By Anne Dudley Ellis
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Critics, including a Fresno doctor, blasted the Fresno Unified School District on Wednesday for a suicide-risk screening program the district tried out at Hoover High School the past two years.

Concerns were raised during the public comment period at a meeting of the governing board.

The district is not using the TeenScreen Program currently but is working with Fresno County officials and other agencies on possible implementation at high schools, said Pete Summers, executive director of prevention and intervention for the district.

The program includes a 10-minute computer survey that asks students a variety of questions, including whether the teens have considered suicide.

About 400 10th-graders at Hoover High took the survey last year and the year before as part of a pilot program, Summers said.

Critics said students who answered "yes" to many of the questions could be unfairly categorized as suicidal and the program could lead students to take unnecessary psychiatric drugs.

Fresno physician Larry Scott called TeenScreen "bogus." One of his criticisms was that the program seemed slanted toward psychiatric treatment, when some emotional troubles could be caused by allergies or poor nutrition.

Retired teacher Sharon Kientz said the questionnaire was "loaded for positive responses."

"How many [students] have been sucked into the psychiatric drug market?" Kientz asked the governing board.

Critics' harsh comments prompted alarmed murmuring through the board-meeting audience.

Board President Luisa Medina said Summers and John Marinovich, in charge of high schools for the district, would examine the concerns.

In responding to questions from the media outside the board room, Summers disputed the characterization of TeenScreen as a dangerous program that

usurped parents' authority over their children. Summers said students must have their parents' permission to complete the survey, and subsequent counseling sessions with mental health professionals also required permission.

Summers said teen suicide is a significant problem and the questionnaire could help students in distress get help. He did not have statistics on students who have been helped because of the questionnaire.

The TeenScreen Web site says the program is overseen by the Carmel Hill Center at Columbia University in New York.

Media accounts indicate the program has attracted controversy nationwide.