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RUTH HOLLADAY

## Teen privacy concerns spur suit over psych test

Conscientious parents concerned that their children perform well on ISTEP starting Monday would be wise to pay attention to a less incisive and more insidious exam creeping into some Indiana high schools.

Called TeenScreen, this computerized Q&A is designed to diagnose mental illness and identify depression and suicidal tendencies in adolescents.

That ambitious agenda, plus a history of giving the test to some students without parental permission, has put TeenScreen in the hot seat. Friday, a lawsuit outlining these complaints was filed in federal court in the Northern District of Indiana in South Bend by a Northern Indiana couple and their 16-year-old daughter.

They charge that the Columbia University test violates parental and child rights at federal and Indiana levels and invades privacy.

"This is a big issue because TeenScreen is in a lot of states," said John Whitehead, president of The Rutherford Institute, a civil liberties organization in Charlottesville, Va., representing the family.

"Basically a child goes to school one day thinking she is normal and comes home that night thinking she is not."

That sums up the effect of TeenScreen on Chelsea Rhoades, daughter of Osceola residents Teresa and Michael Allen Rhoades, said Whitehead and John R. Price. Price, an Indianapolis attorney, is participating in the lawsuit.

According to her mom, Chelsea is well-adjusted and a high achiever at school in Mishawaka. But she "flunked" the TeenScreen test in December when it was administered to her class.

Instead of a grade, she got a diagnosis.

Here are some questionable questions from the 11-page test: Have you often felt very nervous or uncomfortable with a group of children or young people? Have you had an attack when all of a sudden you felt very afraid or strange? Have you often worried that things you touch are dirty or have germs?

A mental health worker visiting school told Chelsea she had two disorders: She was obsessive compulsive, and she suffered from social anxiety. If her conditions got worse, she was warned, her mother should take her to a mental health center.

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Small comfort, perhaps, but the majority of her peers were also deemed mentally unstable, the lawsuit said.

This is insanity, said Ken Kramer, a former Hoosier now living in Clearwater, Fla., where TeenScreen was introduced a few years ago, then voted out by the School Board.

Kramer, a researcher, has become Public Enemy No. 1 for the program, busting it consistently on his Web site, [www.psychsearch.net/teenscreen.html](http://www.psychsearch.net/teenscreen.html).

Still, TeenScreen has defenders in high places. Endorsed by President Bush, it has the backing of a strong advisory council, some with ties to the pharmaceutical industry, and the National Alliance of the Mentally Ill.

"It is another tool that can be used to help screen kids for depression," said Deborah Washburn, president of the Indianapolis chapter of NAMI.

Perhaps. But the tool can become a weapon, according to Chelsea Rhoades and her parents.

**Ruth Holladay's column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. You can reach her at (317) 444-6444 or [ruth.holladay@indystar.com](mailto:ruth.holladay@indystar.com)**

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