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County, city schools partner with Mental Health for counseling

By Trent Moore

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CULLMAN — Mental health issues can grow and worsen for years before being addressed — if they ever are — but now education officials hope a new joint initiative can identify and deal with problems at an early age in local schools.

Cullman County and Cullman City Schools have partnered with Mental Healthcare of Cullman to provide expanded counseling services to students beginning in the 2013 school year. Students will be referred by guidance counselors for additional consultation, and the services will be piloted at a handful of schools this fall.

The school systems will provide meeting space for sessions, while the mental health agency will provide counselors. Counseling will not be provided for free, though officials say assistance is typically covered under most insurance plans. For students referred into the program with no insurance, the mental health agency has access to grant funds to help pay for assistance.

Cullman County Board of Education Superintendent Billy Coleman said he believes the program can help bridge the gap between what guidance counselors can offer and the additional help that some students might need.

“Mental Health offers a wide range of services, and this is just another way for the school system to help students in all aspects of their lives,” he said. “I feel it’s a great partnership and helps the school provide more opportunities to help young people who may be facing some issues that prevent them from having a great life.”

By focusing on teens, Coleman said he believes the program can help provide emotional and psychological balance for students at what can be a tumultuous time in their adolescence.

“You hear stories nationwide of students who’ve had issues for several years, then all of the sudden some real crisis occurs before they’re addressed. We want to identify students at an early age and provide assistance, and hopefully make a huge impact on that student’s life,” he said. “It’s great to think we’ll be able to offer services when these issues are first developed and get help for those students. I think it’s a way to be proactive, instead of reactive.”

Mental Healthcare of Cullman Executive Director Chris Van Dyke said the program is modeled on similar initiatives across the state, and he believes it can be a major asset for local teens.

“It’s something done in other parts of the state, and they’re trying to expand so eventually it’s in all parts of the state,” he said. “The real benefit is having a counselor located at the school to help the kids, so transportation and things like that aren’t an issue. It also helps the school because we can have better communication and know how they’re doing in school. We always want to catch things as early as possible and improve that child’s potential for success in school and the rest of their life.”

Van Dyke said he expects his department will probably have to hire at least one additional employee to handle the increased case load, but the specifics of the arrangement have yet to be worked out.

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