

HB 3474

From the desk of
Rep. Lew Frederick**ALBANY**
Democrat-Herald**Editorial: Progress in our thinking**

16 MINUTES AGO • BY MIKE MCINALLY, ALBANY DEMOCRAT-HERALD

A pilot program in Lebanon to screen seventh-graders for depression, and a legislative proposal that clarifies the rules surrounding notice of such screenings, both offer signs that we're making progress in how we think about mental illness.

In Lebanon, the school district received parental permission forms to screen between 60 and 70 of its roughly 200 seventh-graders. School officials said about 15 percent of the screened questionnaires came back indicating that the students needed some kind of assistance, and resources were made available to those students and their families.

Of particular interest to the program's organizers was that the screenings highlighted some students who weren't on anybody's radar screen for potential issues — and getting help early to those students and families may well have helped to avoid larger issues in the future.

The Lebanon program wasn't without controversy. Some Lebanon residents called the program a governmental intrusion into personal privacy.

Other school districts in the valley, in particular Corvallis, have been keeping a close eye on the Lebanon project. Although Lebanon officials said they were pleased with the results, they haven't made a decision yet about whether to do it next year.

The legislative measure, House Bill 3474, represents another worthwhile step forward in clarifying the screening procedure.

Right now, although schools in Oregon can't give depression screenings without parents' knowledge, the law doesn't specify whether parents must actively opt in to give their consent, or whether consent can be passive, with screening allowed unless a parent specifically opts out.

HB 3474, sponsored by mid-valley representatives Sara Gelser, Andy Olson and Sherrie Sprenger, would change that.

Both options still are available to schools under HB 3474, Gelser said, but in either case, the bill specifies that parents have the right to request in writing that their student not participate.

It also specifies how and when parents must receive notification. Under the bill, if a district does choose to do a screening, parents and legal guardians must receive a written, mailed notice of the screening at least two weeks before.

The notice must provide information about who will conduct the screening and who will have access to the information, none of which is currently required under the law.

The bill also prohibits any results from the screening from being included in a student's educational record. And it specifies that screening can be done only for a classroom or a specified grade, so as not to target a particular student.

Gelser said her bill has been contentious, which shouldn't be surprising considering the stigma that's still attached to mental health issues.

But if we're serious about stripping away that stigma, and finding ways to get treatment to people earlier, when it can do the most good, House Bill 3474 and the trial project in Lebanon are two solid steps in the right direction. (mm)