

Mental Health *(Continued from page 1)*

Reaching 43,000 young people at nearly 170 sites in 36 states, the program screens 9th- and 10th-graders for risk of suicide, anxiety disorders, depression, and drug and alcohol disorders.

Questions asked in the screening cast a very wide net. It is hard to imagine any teenager who would not answer some of the questions in the affirmative. (See sidebar on sample questions.)

TeenScreen officials say that generally up to one-third of the students who undergo screening show some signs of mental health problems, and about half of those are referred to mental health services — for a total of about 15% of the students screened. Parental consent is currently required for the screening questionnaire.

Sites have flexibility in who administers and scores the questionnaire. Often the test is conducted by a school psychologist, guidance counselor, social worker or college psychology student. Students whose scores raise red flags meet with a mental health professional — often a volunteer — and parents are notified.

The Alliance for Human Research Protection argues that screening “for hidden mental illnesses — as if mental illness needs to be ferreted out and captured like a rabid animal” — can open the door to discrimination and forced treatment. (*The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*, 8-1-04)

Texas Medication project under fire

Another program lauded by the New Freedom Commission, the Texas Medication Algorithm Project, drew criticism when a Pennsylvania government employee revealed that state officials had received money and perks from drug companies who stand to gain from it.

In his whistleblower report, Allen Jones of the Pennsylvania Office of the Inspector General states that the “politi-

cal/pharmaceutical alliance” that developed the Texas project — which promotes the use of newer, more expensive antidepressants and anti-psychotic drugs — was behind the recommendations of the New Freedom Commission. Those recommendations represent an effort to develop a “national policy to treat mental illness with expensive, patented medications of questionable benefit and deadly side effects, and to force private insurers to pick up more of the tab,” he asserts.

Moreover, Jones cites ties between members of the New Freedom Commission and the Texas project or companies that helped start it, as well as ties between manufacturers of drugs recommended in the plan and the Bush family, campaign or administration.

Antidepressants carry new warning

While the New Freedom Commission appears poised to promote the use of antidepressants through schools, the Food and Drug Administration in late 2004 responded to mounting pressure to warn against risks associated with antidepressants given to minors. In October, the FDA ordered that all antidepressants carry warnings that they “increase the risk of suicidal thinking and behavior” in children who take them. The FDA’s action, which followed a recommendation of its advisory panel, was driven by data showing that on average 2% to 3% of children taking antidepressants have increased suicidal thoughts.

The FDA decision came some ten months after regulators in the United Kingdom declared most antidepressants unsuitable for children under 18. (See *Education Reporter*, Feb. and June 2004 for a history of regulatory action on this issue.) It is unclear what, if any, effect the FDA decision will have on the New Freedom Commission’s stated desire to increase the availability of antidepressants to schoolchildren. 🍌

Accountability *(Continued from page 1)*

graduation technical training.

Citing data suggesting that few unskilled jobs will remain in the U.S. past 2010, Ohio Gov. Bob Taft told *Education Week*, “The preparation of our workforce is probably the number-one issue in Ohio.” (11-24-04) In November the Ohio board of education’s task force on high schools recommended more academic rigor, relevance for students, and stronger relationships between educators and their students. More testing may be on the way to identify 9th-graders who need help.

Trends toward smaller high schools and exit exams are part of the high school reform efforts (see *Education Reporter*, Sept. and Dec. 2004). The governors’ association plans a national summit conference about high school reform ideas in February.

President Bush campaigned for reelection on a plan to improve educational accountability in the high school grades, promising “a new focus on math and science” and “a rigorous exam before graduation.”

Upon graduation from high school, students must be ready to go to college or qualified to begin high-wage jobs, the president stated when he accepted the Republican nomination in New York last September. “Most new jobs are filled by people with at least two years of college, yet only about one in four students gets there.”

A recent survey of 120 American corporations concluded that a third of employees in blue-chip companies wrote poorly and businesses were spending as much as \$3.1 billion per year on remedial training. The study was conducted by the National Commission on Writing, a panel established by the College Board. (*New York Times*, 12-7-04)

The heavy use of e-mail in corporate settings has exposed many more employees’ glaring writing deficiencies. An entire educational industry has sprouted to offer remedial writing instruction to adults, involving universities, for-profit schools, freelance teachers, workshops, video and on-line courses. 🍌

Math News *(Continued from page 1)*

Progress last year. But Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution asserts that those scores are improving because the test is “extraordinarily easy.”

In a report issued in November, he wrote that almost 40% of the questions on the 8th-grade version address skills taught in the 1st or 2nd grade. Too many problems rely on whole numbers instead of fractions, decimals and percentages, he argued.

The Loveless report also found that only 22% of 252 surveyed middle-school math teachers had majored in math in college, and only 41% had teaching certificates in math.



Tom Loveless

Among U.S. college freshmen who plan to major in science or engineering, one in five requires remedial math courses, according to the National Science Board, an arm of the National Science Foundation. Enrollment by American students in graduate science and engineering programs dropped 10% between 1994 and 2001. Enrollment of foreign students grew 35%.

Singapore math more thorough

Singapore’s and Japan’s consistently high performance on international math tests has spurred some U.S. school districts to import math curricula from those countries (see *Education Reporter*, Dec. 2004). Singapore’s elementary school curriculum covers only a third of the topics typically found in U.S. textbooks, but the material is taught much more thoroughly and students develop significantly better computation skills.

Both rote learning and visual tools are important in the Singapore approach. By grades 7 and 8, the pupils are doing high school-level algebra. The Singapore curriculum is already producing better test scores in the North Middlesex, MA school district, which began incorporating it in 2000. (*Wall Street Journal*, 12-13-04)

Meanwhile, traditional American

math books by John Saxon, which were popular in many states including California before they were discarded in favor of “new-new-math” texts, are turning up in Asian locations such as the Philippines, reports columnist Linda Schrock Taylor. (*LewRockwell.com*, 12-16-04). Newer versions of the Saxon texts being sold in this country by the current publisher, Harcourt Achieve, apparently have moved closer to “new-new-math.” (*LewRockwell.com*, 1-10-05) John Saxon is no longer alive to approve the changes.



John Saxon

‘Anti-racist math’ flops

Critics of trendy, non-rigorous math curricula found new ammunition in January in the case of the Newton, MA school district. The Boston suburb has seen its state math test scores drop for several years, and administrators have expressed puzzlement. It turns out that between 1999 and 2001 the district adopted an “anti-racist multicultural math” curriculum. In 2001 administrators defined the new top priority for teaching math as “Respect for Human Differences.”

The curriculum guidelines continue, “Students will:

- Consistently analyze their experiences and the curriculum for bias and discrimination;
- Take effective anti-bias action when bias or discrimination is identified;
- Work with people of different backgrounds and tell how the experience affected them;
- Demonstrate how their membership in different groups has advantages and disadvantages that affect how they see the world and the way they are perceived by others” (*townonline.com*, 1-12-05)

With those priorities for a math curriculum, is it any wonder the Newton students are falling behind in math? 🍌

Briefs *(Continued from page 2)*

Ritalin use by children may cause depression later, new research on rats suggests. Researchers at Harvard Medical School’s McLean Hospital and the University of Texas-Southwestern in recent months have separately reported depressive symptoms in adult rats exposed to Ritalin early in life. The findings raise concerns that Ritalin and other stimulants

used to treat attention deficit disorder in young children — often at the urging of school officials — may permanently alter the brain and lead to depression in adulthood. The criteria used for diagnosing the disorder are notoriously subjective and overdiagnosis is believed to be widespread. (*Wall Street Journal*, 1-25-05) 🍌

School Funding *(Continued from page 3)*

18-month SC trial

South Carolina wound up an 18-month trial in December in an 11-year-old suit. Whatever the trial judge decides, the case is likely to be appealed to the state supreme court, which overturned the judge’s initial dismissal of the case in 1999.

The South Carolina constitution contains no verbiage on the adequacy of educational funding, but the state supreme court ruled in 1999 that a “minimally ad-

equated” education is constitutionally required. State lawyers argued at trial that low student achievement by poor, rural children cannot be overcome by additional funding for K-12 schools, which has already increased substantially in the years since the suit was filed.

“Why would we think that the next batch of more money will do what the first batch of more money could not do?” asked attorney Bobby Stepp in closing arguments. (*Education Week*, 1-5-05) 🍌