

## **Op-Ed**

### **Emotionally Disturbed Children Deserve Better From our School System**

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When it comes to our children, rhetoric and sound bites are often free-flowing. They are our future. They are the leaders of tomorrow. We are working to make sure none are left behind.

The truth of the matter, however, is that children are being left behind – especially if they have a mental illness. As many as 20 percent of U.S. children may have a mental health problem, and as many as half of those may have a serious emotional disturbance and associated learning disabilities.

Children with emotional disturbances often are pigeonholed early in life as being unable to learn or get along with their classmates. Teachers and administrators see them as inappropriate, hyperactive, impulsive, aggressive, anxious or just plain immature.

While many children exhibit some of those characteristics – more often than parents would like to admit – students with mental, behavioral and emotional disorders have been cited as among the most under-identified, misdiagnosed and underserved disabled student populations. And even when children are correctly identified, their diagnosis and start of treatment are delayed because of the later onset of emotional disturbance, increasing the likelihood of they will not have success in school.

According to the federal Department of Health and Human Services, an estimated two-thirds to three-fourths of children with emotional problems do not receive the health or behavioral health services they need, either from school or community agencies. That leaves them to struggle academically and socially, get in more trouble and continue their emotional spiral downward.

A greater effort must be made to inform educators about mental illness in children and help them take the appropriate steps to get their students the help they need before greater problems arise. And now is perfect time to do just that.

With the adoption of the Children and Youth Cabinet Act into law by the 2007 Florida Legislature and Gov. Charlie Crist, we have a tremendous opportunity to demonstrate this state's commitment to all students by setting a high priority on addressing the clear link between emotional disturbance and school failure.

And that link is a strong one.

The National Council on Disability estimates that as many as 35 percent of students entering school are considered to be at high risk for later social and academic failure. These emotionally disturbed children have a range of conditions and diagnoses, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depressive or anxiety disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, and impulse control disorders. Yet, states may be failing to correctly identify 80 percent of children qualified for assistance under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act based on their emotional disturbance.

It is no news to anyone with children or with any experience in our education system that a child's social, behavioral, and emotional problems frequently lead to academic difficulties. The U.S. Department of Education and several researchers have found that seriously emotionally disturbed children get lower grades, fail more courses and exams, miss more days of school, are retained at the same grade level more frequently, drop out more often and graduate at lower rates.

The problem for these young people certainly will not end when they leave school. In fact, many will struggle for the rest of their life. By young adulthood, about 30 percent of seriously emotionally disturbed children experience homelessness, unemployment, and serious drug or alcohol problems. By age 25, up to 65 percent have been arrested.

So what can we do for the estimated 600,000 Florida students with an emotional disturbance? As Florida's schools prepare to start a new school year, it is essential that the Department of Education, the Department of Children and Families, other state and local agencies and schools develop an agenda to achieve better academic, health and social outcomes for emotionally disturbed children.

State and local communities should develop a comprehensive, effective initiative to serve these children. Model programs would include child assessments; academic programs customized to meet the needs of emotionally disturbed children as well as a full range of in-school and community-based child mental health services.

We can no longer accept the wasted potential of hundreds of thousands of children who are being "left behind" because of an illness that they did not choose. It is time to step up and provide them every opportunity for success in school and for the rest of their lives.