

**BREAKING** ; Six-story hotel proposed in downtown Cedar Falls

[http://wfcourier.com/news/local/education/schools-trying-to-fill-gaps-in-child-psychiatry/article\\_59917c3c-26b7-590a-92c9-1af57bad338a.html](http://wfcourier.com/news/local/education/schools-trying-to-fill-gaps-in-child-psychiatry/article_59917c3c-26b7-590a-92c9-1af57bad338a.html)

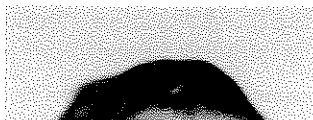
## **Schools trying to fill gaps in child psychiatry**

MackENZIE ELMER [mackenzie.elmer@wfcourier.com](mailto:mackenzie.elmer@wfcourier.com) Feb 3, 2014

**Lincoln**

COURTNEY COLLINS / Courier Staff Photographer

**BUY NOW**



*Part of an occasional series on mental health issues.*

**WATERLOO** | More schools in Iowa are adding on-campus specialists to treat a rising population of students with severe mental illness.

There's a statewide shortage of child psychiatrists, and parents don't always have the means to transport kids to appointments, so more children show up to class with substantial learning barriers stemming from mental illness.

Cedar Falls Community School District is one of a number of districts hiring permanent mental health counselors to serve children during the school day.

"As a state and a country we're not prepared for this new wave of mental illness," said Jill White, coordinator of student services for Cedar Falls. "Schools are becoming more and more responsible to make sure kids have access to education."

The district has applied for funding from Cedar Valley Promise, a nonprofit organization focused on children, to hire a mental health counselor for the junior high and high school starting next school year. The district is also applying to use some state drop-out prevention funding to hire another mental health counselor for the elementary schools. Students will get in-school therapy with parent consent.

"Our counselors used to deal more with bullying or parent divorce. Now we're getting more issues like eating disorders, anxiety and depression," White said.

School counselors have noticed an increase in student absences for mental health appointments with specialists outside the Cedar Valley. In a recent survey, counselors said they saw students struggling with depression, anxiety, ADHD, family conflicts, anger and substance abuse on a daily basis.

Over 50 students in each building need mental health services but don't have access.

A big barrier is the lack of child psychiatrists and therapists in the area. There is typically a six- to eight-week waiting list for appointments, White said.

Iowa only has 38 working child and adolescent psychiatrists, according to 2012 data from the Office of Statewide Clinical Education Programs, a division of the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine that tracks the number of medical professionals in the state.

The burden is falling on schools, in part, because the state's plan to overhaul Iowa's mental health care system is geared toward adults. In the new regional system, the state is mandating which services must be available to those over the age of 18.

"The redesign as it impacts our program actually excluded children," said Bob Lincoln, administrator of mental health services in Black Hawk County.

Some counties didn't do anything for children and some did, so the redesign's intent was to strike a balance. It permits counties to continue existing children's mental health services, but it doesn't provide any new funding.

Children from low-income families in Iowa can get health insurance coverage for mental health from state and federally run programs like HAWK-I and Medicaid. But there is still inequity.

"When we started redesigning the adult system the question I raised was, you think you'd want to redesign the children's system first and then the adults system," said State Rep. Lisa Heddens, D-Ames.

Heddens serves on the state health and human services budget subcommittee and the mental health and disability services redesign fiscal viability study committee.

She said before the redesign law would reach children, lawmakers need to fix coverage gaps for adults with brain injuries and developmental disabilities.

"It's going to come down to money."

The Waterloo Community School District has provided in-school mental health counselors since the 1990s. It contracts with three mental health practitioners from the Success Street program in conjunction with Black Hawk Grundy Mental Health Center. They provide free therapy, counseling, intervention and evaluations.

But Tom Eachus, the administrator at Black Hawk-Grundy Mental Health Center, agreed with Heddens that the mental health redesign is starting at the wrong end of the problem.

"It's a matter of kids falling through the cracks. The real emphasis should be, if we can catch kids young enough and early enough, maybe we can prevent mental health problems from developing," he said. "It's either pay me now or pay me later."

Some rural districts contract with mental health counselors from nonprofits like Pathways Behavioral Services. Anthony Michaels, a Pathways mental health counselor, contracts with Chickasaw County schools. Though he's only held that position for the past year, he's already got a full case load.

"I think a lot of schools are drowning in the problem where they used to be able to make referrals to the state system," he said.

He used to work at Cromwell Child's Center, what used to be part of the state-run Mental Health Institute in Independence. Children had a controlled, full-time living environment, but Michaels said that didn't address the home setting they eventually returned to.

The outpatient model, with students seeking help in public schools, has its ups and downs as well. Parents are still a key piece missing from the treatment process. If students are being counseled at school, they still return to a troubled home setting.

"There isn't a best case scenario," he said.

Michaels said he doesn't think the system is broken but "severely bent." What these children need are advocates.

"Hopefully enough mental health practitioners and administrators can give them that voice," he said.

*On Feb. 5, the paragraph on the Cedar Valley Promise funding for the Cedar Falls Community School District has been clarified in that their district's application for funding is still pending.*



📷 +2

State senator worries mental health funding may not pull through