



(<http://www.atmorenews.com/contact-us/>)



(<http://www.gecarts.com/index.html>)



(<http://www.atmorenews.com/contact-us/>)

AtmoreNews.com

The community's online newspaper

Watching for the 'red flag' – Mental health experts valuable resource in schools

By Sherry Digmon / October 2, 2013 / No Comments



(<http://www.atmorenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/10-02-Mental-health-2594-Bo.jpg>)

Case manager Aubrina Bowens, left, and therapist Michelle Wiesand

There may a child who is troubled, unusually quiet, depressed. A child who suddenly acts out in class. A child who bullies or is being bullied.

Through the years, school administrators and teachers may have tried to reach these children, but they're not trained to deal with their problems. Now, the schools in Atmore, Huxford, Flomaton and Pollard have a resource that can make a huge impact in the lives of troubled children – school-based mental health services provided by Southwest Alabama Behavioral Health Care Systems, based in Brewton.

Monday afternoon, September 30, Escambia County School System Special Services coordinator Suzanne Barnett introduced children's therapist Michelle Wiesand and case manager Aubrina Bowens to the faculty at Escambia County Middle School. Jennifer Chambers is the children's therapist for the elementary schools on this end of the county.

Escambia County Middle School and Rachel Patterson Elementary were the site of the pilot program for the state and it's now into the third school year. Barnett said the state reviewed the program in Escambia County over the summer and was very favorable in their assessment.

The program works through a referral process – either by teachers or parents.

"It's like we have picked up the mental health office in Brewton and dropped it into every school in this end of the county, as well as Flomaton and Pollard," Barnett said. "Some of you have made referrals, and parents have made referrals. We all know that some of our kids are in some tough situations."

Teachers see their students every day and would likely be the first people to see a change in behavior or a behavior that sends up a red flag – a warning that a child needs help.

Addressing the faculty, Barnett said, "Some of you ask 'When do I need to refer a child?'" The answer is if you have a gut feeling, you need to refer them. We are not mental health experts. We are educators, but we have mental health experts here."

She said signs to look for include extreme behavior, a bad home situation, bullying and being bullied, depression. Wiesand, who has 16 years experience, agreed the "gut feeling" that something's wrong may be the best guideline. She suggested teachers also pay attention to children who are irritable or sad a lot.

"Go ahead and refer them, even if it comes to nothing," Wiesand said. "I would like to invest my time in preventing anything from happening. We're here for the kids."