

Editorial: A pressing need

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A common complaint about the state of public education is that government expects schools to not only educate students, but also provide most everything a child might need. There are federally funded meals available, breakfast included, and, in some locations, even when school isn't in session. There is instruction that many believe are lessons that should be learned in the home, and that teachers are too often expected to become surrogates for parents and guardians who fail to raise their children adequately.

Those are valid concerns. Another concern -- diagnosed behavior disorders in Alabama's children -- has risen to an alarming level.

Last week, Dothan City Schools Superintendent Tim Wilder asked the school board for additional nurses at Girard Middle School and Honeysuckle Middle School, saying that workloads there require more professional staff.

School nurses don't simply wait around for a child to scrape a knee on a playground or choke on a chicken bone in the lunchroom. Federal laws requiring equal access have resulted in youngsters with significant medical challenges being enrolled in public schools, making adequate nursing care necessary.

Still, much of a school nurse's work is the distribution of medication -- primarily attention deficit hyperactivity disorder medications such as Ritalin and Adderall.

ADHD, first recognized in 1902, was studied by the National Institutes for Mental Health in 1967 with regard to the use of stimulants to treat hyperactive children. In recent years, diagnoses of ADHD have increase steadily at about 3 percent per year, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

It's particular troublesome in Alabama, which ranks second only to North Carolina in the percentage of children diagnosed with ADHD. Nationally, the rate of ADHD diagnosis among children between ages 4 and 17 is 9.86 percent. In Alabama, the same group measures 14.3 percent.

The situation calls for thoughtful consideration on several fronts, including the causes of Alabama's high rate of ADHD diagnoses among children, the consequences of mainstreaming students with special physical, medical or instructional needs into basic classrooms and the apparent erosion of the family unit and parental involvement.

However, the school board's most pressing issue is providing the appropriate staffing to serve the needs of the students in its charge. It should weigh its options and priorities, and find a way to provide the nursing staff necessary.